Marginalize Community College Students' Perspectives of their First Time in Honors and Experiences with Tracking

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Many of the variables that determine college admission are beyond a student’s control, including the academic track they were assigned as early as primary school—often referred to as “ability-grouping” or skills-homogeneous classes. Even in higher education, students feel the effects of unequal sorting and sifting from tracking. The purpose of this study was to learn from marginalized community college students who were in low and middle track courses in high school. The study located how socially marginalized students taking honors courses for the first time perceived their past experiences with tracking, current opportunities in community college honors, and ways tracking impacts identity. Data was gathered in a single case, at a Midwestern community college, through a two-part interview and digital diary recordings from participants who self-identified as socially marginalized. Results show high school low and middle track placement has negative effects on a students’ self-confidence into adulthood. Findings reveal secondary educators’ behaviors and peer-to-peer interactions are negatively influenced by low-track placement. Furthermore, data show labels and stereotypes assigned to academic tracks continue in community college. There is strong evidence to suggest students perceive honors courses as a means to break through financial barriers and secure honors scholarships at transfer institutions.
MARGINALIZED COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR FIRST TIME IN HONORS COURSES AND EXPERIENCES WITH TRACKING

BY

TRINA SOTIRAKOPULOS

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A DISSEYERATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Doctoral Director:

Dr. Eui-kyung Shin
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Overview

Since the 1980s, researchers have analyzed the various ways so-called “ability grouping” has impacted student learning. Educational theorists dating back to the early 1900s, like John Dewey, argued that sorting and ranking students was harmful to their learning. Shortly preceding Dewey, a Committee of Ten claimed students should learn in the same classrooms, unless they were well-below “intelligence” levels. Later, critical theorists like Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault suggested that sorting and ranking individuals was both a form of power, rendering people in these hierarchical structures as powerless, as Foucault’s theories suggested, and crafted a learned sense of hopelessness, like Freire’s theories suggested. Yet, in 2023, the American education system still sorts and ranks students by so-called ability, with skills-homogeneous classrooms labeled “regular,” “advanced,” and “honors.”

The impact of sorting and ranking students into what we now call tracks has detrimental effects on their self-esteem and mental health. Students internalize labels assigned to low-tracked classrooms, such as “slow,” “dumb,” and “slacker.” Teachers’ behaviors toward low-track students contribute to feelings of inadequacy well into adulthood. What’s worse is that low-income and immigrant students, and those who are not racially privileged, are being assigned to low and middle-track classes more often than wealthy and White students. Low-income students in low-track classes are further marginalized by this fated system that makes them feel lesser, not
only because peer-to-peer interactions tell them they are not welcome, but because labels like “low” or “regular” make them feel they are not good enough.

Low and middle track students who stay in skills-homogeneous tracks often do not meet the requirements for university entrance. By eighth grade, students tracked in low math will not meet the math requirement for many universities (Noguera et. al, 2006), unless they are at a high school with summer school intervention programs. Tracking is unfairly prohibiting students from attending universities by placing them in courses that do not meet the admissions requirements for college attendance.

Not only do tracks limit students’ higher education plans, but the cost of college tuition pushes many families to financial atrophy. It is widely understood that college tuition causes enormous strain on American families, and the path to a college degree can be crippling on a family’s finances. Since 1981, the cost of public college tuition has gone up 125%. In 2021, the average annual tuition rate at a four-year college is $25,615 (Hanson, 2021). With these figures in mind, it is no wonder that Americans are desperate to find ways for their students to attend college at a lower cost.

If a family cannot afford $30,000 a year for college tuition (a low estimate for in-state tuition, room and board), families rely on other means to finance college. Students who receive college funding from the government are left with limited higher-education options given the minimal financial contribution. For economically disadvantaged families who meet the mystical Pell Grant requirements—an undefined formula that many low-income families do not qualify for—to receive Pell funds, the $6,495 annual aid only covers 25% of full college tuition (College Foundation). An affordable alternative for Pell recipients is in-district community college tuition at roughly $6,744 (Hanson, 2021). Another option for families to fund college is through merit-
based scholarships awarded to students for various secondary education accomplishments like high GPAs and SAT scores, honors and AP coursework, and athletic performance. Yet, students in this study were not granted access to honors and AP coursework in high school, and many could not afford SAT retakes or test-prep tutors. Only one student in the study qualified for Pell Grant funds during her first attempt at college. Another student had to emancipate himself from his family, live home and food insecure, in order to qualify for Pell funds.

As subsequent chapters will reveal, within the variables to secure scholarships, particularly high GPAs and honors coursework, schools perpetuate systems of inequality, and the problem metastasizes in higher education—causing a stratified education system. Additionally, many of the variables that determine college admission are beyond the student’s control, and, even in higher education, students feel the effects of unequal sorting and sifting that began in primary school. As a result of being placed in low and middle track classes, being told they weren’t good enough for honors or AP courses, and struggling financially, students in this study enrolled in community college.

Tracking

One variable often outside of a student’s control is the so-called ability grouped course content, also known as tracking, orchestrated by teachers and administrators. While parents may not see this as an issue when their child is in middle or high school, by the time students apply for college they will notice the effects of tracking. Tracking, or placing students into low, middle, and high-level—honors and AP—coursework, sorts students into different classes in middle school which has far-reaching influence on college admissions (Oakes, 2005; Rubin et
Research shows tracking benefits privileged groups over marginalized students (Gorski, 2018; Hochschild, 2003; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Ruben et al., 2006). As early as fourth grade, students in America are placed in classrooms that influence their futures, often based on their racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, social and cultural capital (Gorski, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 2005; Rubin et al., 2006). Students in low-track math in middle school will not reach the math qualifications for four-year universities, while those in high-tracked math will qualify for selective universities (Rubin et al., 2006).

**Stratification**

High tuition costs create an education marketplace where economically advantaged families can afford elite universities while middle class and families living in poverty have limited choices. Neo-liberal market-driven practices, including attracting tuition dollars to fund universities, leads to highly stratified systems, with open-enrollment community colleges at the bottom tier and private, elite universities at the top (Labaree, 2013). Essentially, only the rich can afford to send their children to college. Beyond the status assigned to the degree a student receives from a state, ivy, or well-known institution, employment is aligned with the type of degree a student received. For example, junior college jobs are at the bottom tier and jobs with the greatest social advantage are obtained after attending the top tier institutions like Harvard (Labaree, 2013). The result of the over-stratified system is that privileged groups remain at the top and underprivileged groups pay a premium for social opportunity (Labaree, 2013). Because the government pulled back on state and federal funds, inequality will continue to exist in higher education, since a family’s finances will continue to predict where a child can go to school.
(Shavit et al., 2007). Socioeconomic and racial structures also contribute to the over-stratified system in education, as the sections below will reveal.

Socioeconomic Structure

Another variable that influences higher education options—yet remains absolutely outside a student’s control—is social class. Already facing the stresses of poverty, like food and housing insecurity, students in low-income homes are placed in low-tracked classes more often than their economically-advantaged peers (Bratlinger, 2003). Social classes are reinforced in public schools, with low-tracked classrooms serving a higher concentration of students in lower-socioeconomic standing (Hochschild, 2003). Social classes are sorted and separated by low and high tracks—between vocational and college-bound strata (Ruben et al., 2006; Shavit et al., 2007). Placement in high tracked classes is determined by variables such as test scores, grades, and parental involvement (Archbald et al., 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Haggarman, 2015).

The achievement gap exists since privileged classes have more access to school success resources and economically-disadvantaged students must navigate the school system with less access to resources. With tracking, America’s schools perpetuate class systems by allowing advantaged social classes special access to higher-tracked classes (Gorski, 2018; Kozol, 1991; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Variance in test performance can be attributed to social class, since poverty plays a role in the test score gap between White and Black students (Jencks & Phillips 2006). Economically-disadvantaged students with parents who cannot afford test-prep tutors lose out to their more affluent peers whose families can afford resources to enhance test scores, which improve a student’s chance at scholarships and college entrance (Gorski, 2018; Noguera &
Wing, 2006). Cultural capital, a person’s inherited educational privilege based on their family’s resources and academic/employment background (Bourdieu, 1986), enhances a student’s ability to navigate college entrance barriers, while a lack of cultural capital leaves students dependent on school counselors and public school college-prep curricula.

A student also has no control over where they live, yet zip codes often determine opportunities for future success. Census data illustrates how lower GPA scores are associated with low-income areas; whereas individuals living in higher income areas have higher GPA scores (Wing, 2006). Schools in affluent areas have more counselors per student—with some one-on-one advising relationships—while counselors in low-income areas might have hundreds of students in their caseloads (Kozol, 1992; Rubin et al., 2006). Overloaded and overworked school counselors at schools with fewer resources place low-income students who lack economic, social, and cultural capital in low-level courses (Gorski, 2018; Rubin et al., 2006). Based on this research, it is evident that students who lack economic, social, and cultural capital become trapped by a system that relies on local real estate taxes to enhance learning opportunities.

**Racial Structure**

Race is another variable outside a student’s control, yet tracked classrooms are often racialized and segregated (Clotfelter, 2004; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 1985/2005; Ruben et al., 2006; Tyson, 2011). Researchers suggest the achievement gap is a result of education practices that continued to favor the most privileged students while “failing to meet the educational needs of poor children of color” (Noguera & Wing, 2006, p. 8). Diverse high schools
illuminate how high and low tracked classrooms are racialized, with a majority White population in high track classrooms and a majority Black and African American students in low track classes (Clotfelter, 2004; Ruben et al., 2006; Tyson, 2011). Theorists studying the history of education in the United States suggest unequal educational privilege—and America’s constant neglect of education deficiencies—led to our present-day achievement deficits (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Other scholars point to the way educational inequality is nested in homeownership, where white families had the economic capital to leave cities for the suburbs (Clotfelter, 2004).

Scholars see tracking as a response to desegregated classrooms post *Brown v. The Board of Education*: an attempt to continue separating privileged groups via classrooms and instruction (Clotfelter, 2004; Tyson, 2011). Families with the financial strength to move away from integrated schools—or send their children to private schools—further perpetuated segregated education. Clotfelter suggests that tracked classrooms in integrated schools continued to perpetuate the problems associated with segregated classrooms, since students of color were placed in separate classrooms from their white peers—often in high-tracked classes.

Tracked classrooms are racialized when students are separated by so-called ability level. Tyson (2011) argues tracking, a form of “desegregation without integration” (p. 6) contributes to the way students identify whiteness with intelligence. The emphasis on achievement based on race removes focus from the problem of racialized tracking. Tyson (2011) notes that students in predominantly Black and African American high schools do not associate race with track, but those in diverse settings locate a fundamental racial difference between students placed in honors and AP courses and those in advanced and lower-tracked classes.

It is imperative to invest energy and resources to ensure equity in education, since doing nothing—or avoiding reform—will only perpetuate the same problems. Based on Wing’s (2006)
study, doing nothing means low-income students will continue to have lower GPAs and live in areas with lower incomes. Research is needed to fully understand the impact of tracking on socially marginalized students and how resource-heavy cohorts, like honors, serve to impact student success. The purpose of this dissertation is to study community college honors students who self-identify as marginalized to better understand their experiences with tracking.

Theoretical Framework

With few affordable higher education options, many marginalized students turn to community college, however, these institutions do not produce the same college completion results as four-year universities. At a community college, students are faced with a maze of coursework, complicated curricular requirements, and little academic support to guide their paths to completion (Bailey et al., 2015; Hart, 2019). Increased online instruction (pre-pandemic) and an abundance of cheap labor (unfairly paid adjunct professors) also tarnish the quality of community college curricula (Brown, 2015). The myth of an institution designed to help all community groups succeed is trampled by the complex maze of coursework, bureaucratic structures, and mounting debt (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Using critical theorists, including Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault, and research from critical educators, reveals a tracking system in community colleges that continues to reward privileged groups at an educational establishment designed for disadvantaged students. Although neither Freire or Foucault specifically address community colleges in their writings, both thinkers offer insights into the hierarchical structures of educational institutions that are oppressive.
Students view the world based on their experiences in school and make meaning by “participating in a particular conception of the world” (Freire, 1985, p. xxii). Hierarchical structures in school influence the way students see themselves in the world (Freire, 1970/1993). Foucauldian power theories suggest subjects are placed in social systems based on how they measure up and against social norms (Ferguson, 2001). In an interpretation of Foucauldian theories, Ferguson posits that students internalize the messages received in schools based on standardized tests, psychological tests, and curricula that determine their placement in society. Consider how students are taught social systems based on the type of college they attend: prestigious, public/private four-year, or two-year college (Shavit et al., 2007). Then, consider how students at the lowest higher education strata face labyrinthine obstacles to complete an associates degree or transfer to a four-year institution (Bailey, et al., 2015). Add to that social responsibilities like employment, bills, family, along with a lack of cultural capital, and it becomes clear how community college students determine their placement in society.

A parallel can be drawn to community college students who already see themselves as lesser, either due to being socially marginalized or because of lower grades, which did not afford them as many options for college acceptance. A way to look at the barriers addressed in this chapter is to consider Freire’s (1970/1993) explanation of limit situations. Hopelessness is derived from limit situations (Freire 1970/1993). If a student graduates or transfers—succeeds in the community college environment, this type of action can be described as an “attempt to overcome the limit situations” (p. 72). However, if a community college student becomes trapped in the maze of courses and programs, bogged down by their work and family
responsibilities, or disconnected with the college due to the commuter environment, these limit situations will become barriers for college completion.

While honors students at a community college will also face limit situations like being socially-marginalized, they are in an environment that provides tools to overcome limit situations, including a series of courses that prepare them for transfer, smaller class size, more access to instructors, and curricula that encourages the kind of critical thinking and discussion that Freire is promoting. Honors classrooms represent McInerney’s (2009) description of problem-posing as a way “students become co-constructors of knowledge and active critical investigators of their own lives and society” (p. 27).

Problem Statement

Several studies of honors students are based on high school gifted programs, tracking in middle and high school, college success rates because of secondary education high school placement, honors identity in secondary school, and four-year college honors programs (Legette, 2018; Oakes, 1985/2005; Smith, 2008; Tarasova, 2019; Tyson, 2011). Unpublished dissertations focus on faculty perspectives and the perspectives of first-generation college students, while few studies examine first-time honors students at community colleges (Diehl, 2020; Lane, 2007; Moon, 2012). As of the time of this writing, no other studies investigate students who broke through barriers to get into honors programming at the community college level, which is the purpose of this dissertation.

While honors courses and programs become game-changers for some community college students, the problem is community college honors programs are perpetuating the same systems
of privilege present in middle and high schools. GPA and SAT requirements, application essays, and instructor consent are barriers that continue in community college honors programs (Outcalt, 1999). What’s worse is that merit-based scholarships are available in community college honors programs for students who have exceptional high school GPAs and strong application essays (Midhills R&A, Oct. 2021). Once again, average-performing students in high school are pushed out of opportunities for success through the same barriers that kept them away from more prestigious universities.

It is imperative that community colleges consider where resources are directed, given the fragility of the majority of the students on their campuses. Community colleges serve a disproportionate number of marginalized students, yet data shows community college students are less likely to earn a four-year degree in comparison to students who start at a four-year institution (Bailey, et al., 2015; Tinto, 2012). Most students who start at a four-year institution are those who were placed in higher tracked classes in secondary schools and had the social and cultural capital necessary to secure college acceptance (Wing, 2006).

Community college honors programs are known as concentrated areas of student success, so studying this cohort allows researchers an opportunity to better understand the benefits of honors classes. Research shows that most community college honors programs utilize resources like more-experienced professors, a program director, experiential learning activities, and a high-emphasis on innovation and critical thinking (Byrne, 1998; Kane, 2001; Kisker & Outcalt, 2005; Outcalt, 1999; Tarasova, 2019). Outcomes of enrollment in two-year college honors programs include higher graduation rates at universities, higher GPAs at the transfer institution, and greater college completion (Honeycutt, 2019; Kane, 2001).
The problem is that, within community college honors programs, privileged groups are hoarding resources that should be directed toward disadvantaged groups. Opportunity hoarding in education is identified when privileged groups “control access” to resources and develop ways to respond in defense of their actions (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 156). Data from the honors program at the study site illustrate dynamic differences between economically disadvantaged students and those who do not qualify for Pell Grant funding. Over 59% of community college honors students received merit-based scholarships and no Pell funds, while 12.6% of merit-based scholars received Pell funds.

An opportunity gap is perpetuated through the honors scholarship program when there is a nearly 50% gap between economically-disadvantaged students and those who are financially stable. Additionally, only 7.5% of first-semester honors students received Pell funds and no scholarship money, and only 20% of the honors students enrolled with neither Pell funds nor a merit-scholarship (all data from Midhills R&A, Oct. 2021). What the data show is that privileged groups who are not economically disadvantaged are receiving scholarships almost two out of three times more than disadvantaged students. Relating the data back to opportunity hoarding, we see privileged groups hoarding the resources—in this case scholarship money to participate in honors courses.

While the researcher does not agree with using the term “ability” to describe tracked groups because the concept reinforces stereotypes associated with perceived intelligence (low-ability vs. high ability), it is important to note that many researchers describe tracked classrooms based on a student’s perceived academic ability (Hochschild, 2003; Hout, 2012; Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). Because of this, much of this study will include the word “ability” in
quotation marks to reference this perception of academic achievement versus an equal and fair system of academic knowledge and skill.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to learn from marginalized students who broke through the barriers to enter honors spaces in community college. The study sought to discover the driving force behind community college students’ choice to enroll in honors. In addition, the study sought to learn how first-time honors students depict their expectations and experiences. The following questions were the catalyst for research:

1) How do socially marginalized students entering honors courses in community college for the first time experience barriers and break through barriers, if any?

2) What opportunities do socially marginalized students gain in community college honors courses?

3) How are first-time honors students’ identities shaped by tracking?

Significance of the Study

Few studies analyze how first-time honors students broke through barriers to take honors courses or examine how community college honors students view tracking. Following researchers’ recommendations, this study was necessary since it looked at the impact of community college honors programming (Honeycutt, 2019). The researcher was unable to locate any studies where community college students reflected on their experiences taking honors for
the first time. Because of this deficit, there was a need for the study brought forth in these chapters.

Delimitations and Limitations

One major delimitation was the scope of this study. The researcher originally intended to collect data from several institutions, however, a single-institution study was necessary given the time and resource constraints. The researcher limited this study by selecting to sample a single-district community college which serves over 48 communities and 36 high schools, versus several community colleges in various states which could yield more conclusive results. Another delimitation was the participant definition, including students who receive Pell Grant funds and those who are socially marginalized.

Many facets of the study were outside of the researcher’s control. One limitation of the study was the number of participants. The study sought to locate 5-6 first-time honors students that self-identified as socially-marginalized. For the purpose of the study, participants were those who self-identify as socially marginalized and had not taken honors or AP courses in high school. In total, seven students participated in the study; however, one participant was eliminated from the data, since she disclosed she was in IB, International Baccalaureate, courses in high school. The researcher determined that IB courses were also high-tracked classes, even if they were not called “honors.”

The sample size of six students might seem small and inconclusive to readers; however, the limitations of the study produced this result. To recruit participants, an email was sent out to over 1,000 current and previous honors students at Midhills. The email explained that the researcher was conducting a study on first-time honors students, those who did not take honors in
high school. This line in the email helped qualify the study, but it also told students who already took honors that this study was not one they could participate in. In total, fifty students filled out a questionnaire provided in the recruitment email. The questionnaire then narrowed down the fifty respondents to twenty-five, those who claimed they did not take honors in high school. After the researcher emailed students who potentially qualified, some of the respondents revealed they took an honors course in high school. Others did not respond. Therefore, the small sample size of six students is due to the rare population—those in community college honors who never took honors in high school. From this explanation, it should be more clear why the sample size is small given the limitations of the study. It should also be noted that Lin et al.’s study on the way resources benefit marginalized community college students also included only six students in the study.

Another limitation was the bias the researcher brought to the study based on her background (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher is a White, middle-class, single-mother whose children were college-age at the time this dissertation was published. The researcher experienced poverty while raising young children, qualifying for state utility assistance, so she has experience as an insider who was economically marginalized. The researcher is also an insider who teaches honors courses at a community college.

Methodology: Case Study

Case studies offer a rich, detailed, and complete understanding of the complexities of a particular case and/or issue (Creswell, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case studies are used to investigate a phenomenon within its setting and context “when the boundaries between
phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2018). Case study inquiry is preferred over quantitative research when there are more variables than data points (Yin, 2014). Case studies also require prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Yin, 2014). Information about theoretical propositions in case studies assisted in selecting this research approach over other qualitative approaches.

To discover how students make meaning out of their experiences in the honors program, interviews along with audio diaries served to capture students’ responses. While the researcher did not ask participants for their age, many disclosed in interviews ages ranging from 18 to 30 with varying racial and gender backgrounds. Most of the participants were first-generation colleges students, whose parents did not graduate from college. Five of the six participants identified as economically disadvantaged either in primary, secondary, or community college. This study included a two-part interview, which took place in either one or two face-to-face or Zoom sessions, and three digital diary recordings focusing on the students’ past educational experiences, their current lived experience in the honors program, and reflections on the meaning of their educational experiences (Seidman, 2006). Recorded interviews are stored on a Google Drive and were transcribed on Temi, a website offering paid transcription services, funded by the researcher.

Participants recorded responses to three different prompts in audio diaries. Chism (2020) refers to vlogging, another form of video diaries, as a silent interviewer. Cashmore et al. (2010) used video diaries to capture student experiences, allowing students to discuss anything of interest. To reduce bandwidth and protect participants’ home privacy, the researcher did not request video diaries. The audio diaries and prompts effectively acted as a silent interviewer, even without videos. Documents were also used in this study as a way to collect artifacts to
illustrate the various opportunities in the honors program. Participants received a Google Folder of images containing honors-related flyers, including scholarships, field trips, symposia, honors student clubs, and activities.

Data analysis centered on “key issues from the literature” to make inferences about the research subject (Yin, 2014, p. 38). This type of theory development was used to explain why “acts, events, structure, and thoughts occur” (p. 38). By viewing the students from one program as a singular case, the researcher corroborated findings with other critical researchers who attempted to interpret the results of the oppressive culture in schools (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Applying critical theory to the data strengthened the analysis by illuminating areas of the findings to pay attention to, like the perpetuation of the subordination of social classes in tracked classrooms.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized in five chapters. The first chapter offers an overview, significance, purpose, and design of the study. It also includes the theoretical framework. The second chapter includes a review of literature on critical theory, high school tracking, tracking reform policies and practices, honors programs in secondary and higher education, negative labels associated with tracking, teachers’ behaviors toward tracked students, and community colleges. The third chapter details the research design of the study, including case study methodologies utilized to collect evidence and analyze data. The fourth chapter presents the findings from the interviews and digital diaries collected from first-time honors students. The
final chapter synthesizes the existing literature, implications of the findings, and offers recommendations to educators for discussion.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

As this literature review reveals, tracking in secondary education enhances barriers for students in the margins while perpetuating systems benefitting already-privileged groups (Clotfelter, 2004; Gorski, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 2005; Rubin et al., 2006; Tyson, 2011). To better understand the problem associated with tracking and ways underprivileged groups are funneled into community college, this literature review covers critical theories to aide in the theoretical interpretation of the research and investigates the chronology of tracking, including problems associated with high-track courses, the opportunity gap created by honors programming, and stratification in tracked classrooms and higher education. The review does not cover discipline-specific studies of honors programs. It will instead present research on higher education honors programs with emphasis on community college to provide context for the qualitative study.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory

Critical research in social reproduction theory exposed how schools educate lower and working-class families to become lower-class and working-class workers (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 2001; Oakes, 1985/2005). Countless new stories from 2022 reveal the same results as researchers on detracking: schools attempting to remove tracks are faced with resistance from
parents (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Lewis & Dimond, 2015). Privileged groups support the status quo to “protect their advantage” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 50) and often use avoidance behavior to reduce exposure to members of a lower social strata (Clotfelter, 2004).

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is celebrated for his dedication to analyzing the problems associated with literacy practices and curricula for members of lower social strata: working class and poor citizens. Critics may argue that researchers cannot apply educational theories about Brazilian peasants to American students. However, Kincheloe (2008) shines a light on Freire’s concern with human suffering and the common thread between Brazilian agrarian societies and marginalized Americans. “In the United States, suffering is often well-hidden, but…inner cities, rural Appalachia, or Native American reservations will reveal its existence” (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 12). Suffering in the United States education system is often masked with meritocratic rhetoric about hard work and good grades (Kozol, 1992). Students are led to believe that they all have the potential to succeed and escape poverty, and those who fail do so because of their own faults (Gorski, 2018; Kozol, 1992). Schools rarely teach students that market-driven education and globalized systems exacerbate poverty (Kincheloe, 2008). As a result, many students see college as a way to advance and move out of their social class.

Students undecided about their majors are told community college is a way to save money while pursuing a degree. Yet they are rarely told that they must chose a major in order to get financial aid. Plus, changing majors can cost students money and time. Given this knowledge, one can see how a belief that community college will help students escape poverty can lead a student to severe disappointment. If students lack cultural capital, Bourdieu’s sociological theory defined in the first chapter, needed to navigate the complexities of these
institutions, they face great difficulty navigating the maze of community college courses (Tinto, 2012).

**Power and Freedom in Schools**

Michel Foucault, a prominent French philosopher known for theories on power and control—among many others—addresses the way power is produced and distributed (Foucault, 1981). While students might not initially recognize systems of power in schools, Foucauldian power theories indicate that social structures in schools contribute to ways individuals see themselves and others in society. One of Foucault’s theories focuses on how power is local and internal—within structures rather than top-down (Fraser, 1989). Two interrelated concepts of power are described by Foucault: “[1] Sociological model of power as the agency of social cohesion and normality—ensuring survival of a community; [2] Power as an instance of repression, violence, and coercion” (Gordon, 1980, p. 234). Power serves as a form of repression when used to control large populations inside social structures (Fraser, 1989).

In modern American schools, disciplinary action is an example of Foucauldian power theories. Rules, and punishment associated with breaking rules “operate as systems of normalization” (Ferguson, 2000, p. 52). Students in community college must follow rules about entrance exams, including placement tests for math and English (Hart, 2019). If a student puts off their placement test, more time causes less familiarity with concepts when the student eventually enrolls in community college. A low placement test score can force a student into a developmental course—which does not count toward college credit. This path can lead to further financial hardship and more time spent pursuing a degree.
Tracking can be viewed through a Foucauldian lens when applying the concept of “economy of power” (Foucault, 1981, p. 119). Foucault describes the way power is “continuous, uninterrupted, adapted and ‘individualised’ throughout the entire social body,” (p. 119), which explains how students placed in tracked classrooms interpret power systems by viewing their placement within a tracked system—and within society. The continuous cycle of placement—in courses and in society—can be seen as a form of power and assignment of strata.

Maxine Greene (1988) synthesizes educational theorists, canonized literature, and philosophers to argue the various ways education is a form of freedom. Greene’s interpretation of Foucauldian freedom includes a space for action and power. Greene reminds us that Foucault said, “thought is freedom in relation to what one does” (p. 122). She further calls attention to “the absence of freedom in our schools,” which includes complacency and acceptance for “fated” circumstances (p. 124). Through this lens, one can see how acceptance of tracking practices is a form of acceptance of fated circumstances. What’s troubling is that the absence of freedom in schools begins as early as middle school when track placement influences where a student can attend college.

**Disadvantaged Students and the Cost of Community College**

Already disadvantaged groups with fewer financial resources, more employment responsibilities, and families, often take community college courses that are not exact articulated transfers, which costs them more money than their higher-income peers (Bailey et al., 2015). An extra course that does not count toward graduation can equate to “groceries, health insurance, or children’s clothing” to a low-income community college student (Bailey et al., 2015).
Economically disadvantaged students who attend community college using financial aid are hit with another obstacle when they apply. In order to receive financial aid, a student must declare a major (Bailey et al., 2015). However, considering Florida’s new legislation about paying extra money for courses that do not apply to a program, this leaves students in a further struggle. A change in academic direction could cost the student both time and money, even though they were forced to declare a program in order to receive funding for college.

Applying critical theory to the aforementioned information on enrollment and degree pursuit barriers reveals a perpetuation of the subordination of social classes in community colleges. Power and domination in a pedagogical relationship is not only one of coercion but also “a conquest of the active will of the subordinated classes or the masses” (Escobar et al., 1994, pp. 28-29). The ways students are placed in low and middle-tracked classes—without their own active will—determines where they can apply for college. If their coursework does not fulfill college application requirements, students are driven to open-enrolled community colleges. The low community college graduation rate and 60% baccalaureate graduation rate after six years exemplify how community college students are further forced into the margins (Tinto, 2012). The vulnerabilities presented in this population of college students shed light on why we need to investigate areas of inequality in the very institutions designed to serve marginalized groups.

Curriculum and Power

To Foucault, educational power exists in the production of knowledge and control over what will be known (Ball, 2012). People are simultaneously the subject and object of knowledge (Gordon, 1980). Ball describes a duality between the “the social construction of scientific truths
or material conditions of thought” and the external ways knowledge produces “classes and categories of subjects” with “particular forms of intervention or practices” (p. 13). Using Ball’s interpretation of the external ways knowledge is produced, we can see how tracking represents the Foucauldian power/knowledge dynamic with tracked classrooms (categories of subjects) producing particular “interventions” and “practices.” The external ways knowledge separates groups are in constant conflict with the individual and internal ways a person is educated.

Education/schooling is a Foucauldian theoretical area described as producing learned behaviors that prepare students to mirror “society’s anticipation and values” (Bogdanova & Abrosimova, 2019, p. 132). In concert with research on ways educators teach honors students’ behaviors for success beyond the classroom (Smith, 2008), one might consider how tracked courses teach students to mirror society’s values. In Smith’s study, honors students were taught “how to dress, how to project one’s voice, and how to make ‘acceptable’ choices” (p. 491-2). Students in Smith’s study are aligned with Foucauldian interpretations of the ways schools produce behaviors in students to mirror society’s expectations. Literature in this section also connects with studies about the tiered higher education system mirroring the job market, which will be addressed in this chapter. Through a Foucauldian lens, it becomes clear that the production of classes and categories still takes place in our secondary and higher education systems. One might say our schools are teaching children their placement in society, which certainly calls back to mid-century American ideals.

In order to interrupt outdated, racist, and classist ideologies, Critical theorists emphasize the necessity of social change. A promise of social change includes providing working-class students and adults the tools to “reclaim their own lives, histories, and voices” (Giroux, 2001, p. 227). Freirean literacy theory explains how literacy practices in school form students’ voices and
“deny them the tools…to think and act reflectively” (Giroux, 2001, p. 226). It is difficult to ignore social reproduction theorists’ discussions on the differences between curricula in low and high-tracked courses (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985/2005). Low-tracked courses are illustrated in Freire’s literacy theory where students learn “how to live passively, amidst alienated structures” (Giroux, 2001, p. 227). Considering ways honors and high-tracked classrooms are described as spaces where critical thinking and dialogue thrive, often the opposite is true in low-tracked classes. While educators and theorists elevate conversations about social reproduction in tracked courses, they seem to overlook the importance of hearing community college students describe the ways tracking impacts students. Tracking, based on this literature review, clearly disrupts promises of social change, given the fact that students are not provided the proper tools to “reclaim their own lives” in a system that determines their place in society for them.

Dialogic Inquiry

Freirean critical theories include a student’s construction of knowledge through dialogue. Educators following Freirean practices use problem-posing and constant questioning as a way for learners to construct knowledge (Freire, 1985). Students construct knowledge through dialogue and make meaning of their life-world through observations and discussions. Research shows students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds make their own inferences about inequality in the educational system through dialogue (Taines, 2011). In one exchange, a student described the difference between “bomb” lunches at the suburban school and “leftovers” served at the city public school (Taines, 2011, p. 426). Freirean dialogic inquiry is represented in most college honors programs, which describe their curricula as innovative and creative, focusing on
critical thinking and active engagement (Tarasova, 2019). As the research in this section shows, students draw meaning from their experiences through critical dialogue and reflective thinking—two characteristics of honors curricula. Given the sense of empowerment provided by this type of curriculum, this study listened to ways students describe these learning environments.

Tracking

Chronology of Tracking in Secondary Education

Due to the amount of attention given to the damage tracking causes students in the margins, it is important to review tracking’s roots in America. In 1894, a committee of college and university faculty and administration, called the Committee of Ten, joined to assess secondary education. The purpose of the committee was to make recommendations about secondary education to the National Council of Education. The group planned to host conferences on nine subjects, with 10 members attending each conference. In the area of English, the Committee of Ten argued courses should be identical (National Education Association [NEA], 1894). Recommendations to the National Council of Education included a directive that all pupils with a similar degree of intelligence and maturity be instructed the same way, whether they are going to college, a scientific school, or not attending college.

John Dewey’s 1916 Journal of Education article argues against dividing and classifying citizens. Dewey warns that inclusivity—“a division of interests” and “class and sectional ideas”—will lead to the destruction of our democracy (p. 266). With regard to vocational schools, Dewey suggests “its purpose is shaped to drill boys and girls into certain forms of
automatic skill” which aids others and not the individual (p. 268). Deweyan democratic teaching stresses equalized education; however, this type of democratic unity in schools did not last long.

While the Committee of Ten suggested that all students should be instructed in the same way, 24 years later the *Cardinal Principles* suggested that students should be educated according to the needs of the students. To "seize from every student" their best efforts, the *Cardinal Principles* recommended meeting the needs of various groups based on "aptitudes, abilities, and aspirations" (Department of the Interior, 1918, p. 21). The NEA recommended adapting content and methods based on "capabilities, needs, and interests of the pupils concerned" (Dept. of the Interior, 1918, p. 22). While the document does not address gifted students directly, it does offer provisions for teaching different material to students of varying ability levels. Twenty-one years following the *Cardinal Principles*, John Dewey (1939) suggests separating people into groups is anti-democratic. This foundational change in secondary education is important when considering Oakes's (1985/2005) argument about content discrepancies within various tracks.

Theorists suggest tracking perpetuates social class boundaries (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Clotfelter, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Shavit et al, 2007; Willis, 1977). Bowles and Gintis (1976) frame their argument about social reproduction theory on barriers that divided students by social class: vocational schools were designed for lower-class students and college preparatory schools were for the middle class. Researchers argue income, not intelligence, determined the number of years an individual stayed in school (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Furthermore, social divisions formed in school likely reflect future economic positioning (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Research questions in this study sought to locate how students form identities based on divisions in schools. This study also uncovered students’ perceptions of how they were able to break through barriers to get to college.
The Effects of Tracking

Tracking contributes to the opportunity gap by separating students into college-bound, intermediate, or low-level vocational tracks dependent upon test scores and classroom performance as early as fourth grade (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Research shows tracking and socio-economic standing (SES) greatly influence the opportunity gap and widen the achievement gap (Gorski, 2018; Kotok, 2017; Kozol, 1992). The literature shows White students have disproportionately benefited from high-track/college-bound classrooms where Black students have little representation (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Kozol, 1992; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Based on this information, racial identity and socio-economic standing are proven to influence a student’s placement in tracked classrooms.

The literature shows students who receive more rigorous elementary curricula have the tools to succeed in secondary school (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Parents who can afford to send their children to private middle school create an advantage by preparing them for high-tracked high school coursework (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Rubin et al., 2006; Thompson, 2002). Meanwhile, students who lack social, cultural, and economic capital are disadvantaged (Gorski, 2018; Kozol, 1992; Rubin et al., 2006). Based on this research, it can be determined that students who did not grow up in a household with college-educated parents, attended school in neighborhoods with fewer educational funds, and those who could not afford tutors for advancement have less opportunities for success if they are placed in lower tracked classes.
In contrast, data indicate a correlation between high-level math and four-year college degree completion. The National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) show 64.2% of students who took Calculus or beyond in high school graduated with a bachelor’s degree. Meanwhile, 22.3% of students in low-track math, those leaving high school with Algebra 2 graduated with a bachelor’s degree. Alternatively, 13% of students leaving high school with Algebra 2 graduate with an Associate’s degree while only 6% of students leaving high school having taken Calculus receive an Associate’s degree (all data NCES, 2020). Reviewing this data, it is clear that low-track math courses in secondary education can restrict students from attending a four-year college; meanwhile, high-track math courses assist in securing college degree goals.

Moreover, students’ futures in tracked schools are left in the hands of high school staff and faculty. Oakes (1985/2005) sees counselors as the “locus of control regarding track decisions” (p. 51). Schools in affluent areas have more counselors per student—with some one-on-one advising relationships, while counselors in low-income areas might have hundreds of students in their caseloads (Kozol, 1992; Rubin et al., 2006). Overloaded and overworked school counselors place low-income students who lack economic, social, and cultural capital in low-level courses (Gorski, 2018; Rubin et al., 2006). The result of low-track math placement can eliminate a student’s chance at acceptance into certain universities (Rubin et al., 2006). Therefore, a student’s future can be determined by their high school counselor.

A student’s access to resources and opportunities can determine their achievement in American schools (Gorski, 2018). Research shows secondary education students from privileged racial groups dominate honors spaces and have a better chance of getting into a prestigious university (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Shavit et al., 2007). Additionally, students in higher socioeconomic standing are more likely to be
enrolled in honors and high-tracked courses; that same SES population is more likely to attend four-year colleges and universities (Clotfelter, 2004; Shavit et al., 2007). Meanwhile, census data show that low-income areas also have lower GPA reporting than areas with higher income where higher GPA scores are seen (Wing, 2006). Therefore, a student who grows up in poverty and lives in a low-income area has statistically less of a chance at achieving academic success in high school and beyond.

Tracking and Identity

As a result of de jure and de facto segregation, students of all races attend school together but they receive vastly different curricula depending on the course track and neighborhood they live in (Clotfelter, 2004; Gorski, 2018; Kozol, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 1985/2005). Some theorists see tracking as a means to separate White students from Black peers once schools were desegregated (Clotfelter, 2004). The literature shows White students have disproportionately benefited from high-track/college-bound classrooms where Black students have little representation (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Kozol, 1992; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2002). The review of literature explains how scholars conclude that tracking is racialized, particularly when examining racially diverse high schools.

Researchers also examined the racial structures of tracked classrooms at diverse high schools. Low-level math courses at a racially diverse high school are predominantly filled with Black and African American students (Rubin et al., 2006). Researchers studying a 3,000 student school celebrated for racial diversity found students are segregated in classrooms as a result of
tracking (Noguera & Wing, 2006). In total, 83% of students placed in low-track classes were African American, while 87% in Honors Geometry were White (Rubin et al., 2006). Tracking becomes racialized when large numbers of students from one racial group are separated into tracks, with low tracks seeing a disproportionate number of minority students, while high-tracked classrooms are filled with privileged racial groups.

Schools are areas where racialized spaces, like those seen in studies on tracking, impact how students view themselves (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Thompson, 2002). Research shows Black and African American students leave gifted classrooms for advanced or mid-tracked classes to be with their peers (Thompson, 2002; Tyson, 2011). Black students straddle two cultures between home and school, often feeling like outsiders at school (Thompson, 2002). School employees contribute to racialized treatment of students (Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Thompson, 2002). Moreover, the way students are treated at school influences their motivation and learning (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Steele, 1997). This study sought to understand how community college honors students perceive the way their identities are shaped by tracking and honors course enrollment, including ways tracking perpetuates racial stereotypes.

**Racial Inequality**

Given this study’s emphasis on identity shaped by tracking, a survey of literature on racial stereotypes associated with tracking is necessary. Research shows racial stereotypes form when classrooms are racialized—when one racial group dominates a high-track or low-track classroom (Tyson, 2011). Black and African American students in racially diverse high schools
associate stereotypes with track placement. Black students identify whiteness as giftedness, since most high-tracked classrooms are filled with White students while Black students are disproportionately placed in low-tracked classrooms. Black students at diverse high schools feel pressured by peers to avoid being associated with “brainiacs” and people who don’t look like them (Tyson, 2011, p. 51). The literature shows Black students report feeling isolated, resented, and labeled for being smart, or being separated into high-tracked classes, and often leave gifted classrooms to be with friends (Thompson, 2002; Tyson, 2011). Participants’ voices in this study illuminate ways community college honors students describe these types of labels.

A groundbreaking study from the 1970s reveals students in counter-school groups make fun of well-behaved students and these jokes serve as adhesive for laboring-class students (Willis, 1977). Students who exist outside of capitalism’s grasp—those in the laboring class—are not intimidated by labels and threats of punishment by school authorities. In fact, bad behavior is rewarded in counter-school groups. To counter-school groups, school is viewed as a waste of time since their careers in manual labor are already solidified. Therefore, working class students do not have to believe—or follow—the dominant ideology, since they are free from the confines of “capitalist legitimization” (Willis, 1977, p. 123). This research shows students gain agency by ceasing to allow classroom placement and labels associated with tracking to impact their perceptions, but it is ultimately to their detriment.

In a community college honors program, students build identities based on the assumptions people make about the domain they occupy. Community college students already face stereotypes as a result of the college ranking system, with elite universities on top and community college on the bottom (Labaree, 2013; Shavit et al., 2007). One subgroup at the community college—honors students—are viewed as gifted, motivated, and ambitious (Floyd &
Holloway, 2006). Students in this environment are identified with achievement and, in Steele’s (1997) words, “attain success” based on the domain they occupy (p. 613). Influenced by research on learning environments and identity, this study reveals more about how community college students explain the opportunities gained in honors spaces.

Negative Labels Assigned to Low-Track Students

This study also looked at the ways tracking impacts how students view themselves and others. Behavior—and a student’s ability to behave appropriately—is often associated with where students are placed in tracked classrooms (Ferguson, 2001; Legette, 2018; Smith, 2008). Labels based on track placement lead to an association of stereotypes, and students experience “stereotype threat” when they are labeled in academic spaces (Steele, 1997, p. 614). Black students enrolled in middle school honors courses racialize the behaviors of students in non-honors courses, noting disruptive behaviors, while “being a good student” is associated with honors distinctions (Legette, 2018, p. 1321). Students view non-honors learners as “academically slow,” “bad,” and “nonlearners,” while honors students are “motivated, hard workers, and smart” (Legette, 2018, p. 1323).

Teachers’ Behaviors Toward Tracked Students

Studies on teachers’ assumptions and behaviors toward students in low-track classes demonstrates how teachers see low-tracked students’ “abilities” as more fixed, whereas high-track students are seen as having more limitless potential (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). Teachers in Australia were interviewed about their perceptions of “ability” in their students, and
comments included assumptions that “there’s a lot of kids that aren’t suited for school” (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017, p. 352). Oakes’s (1985) early study on tracking looked at ways teachers used punitive language, using a punitiveness scale to ask students about teachers’ behaviors toward students. Oakes and her team note high-track students had more varied responses about the ways teachers were punitive with prompts like “the teacher makes fun of some students,” or “this teacher hurts my feelings” (p. 109). Oakes and her team also noted a difference in teachers’ behaviors, where high-track teachers used behaviors “thought to promote learning” more so than low-track teachers (p. 110).

Studies on middle school students in lower-tracked courses show the importance of positive relationships between the teacher and student (Sainio et al., 2023). In their examination of the impact teacher closeness had on students determined to be LD, or those with learning difficulties, researchers discovered that a close relationship with a teacher caused a student to have positive academic emotions. In contrast, the researchers found that low presence of teacher closeness caused students to have “increased learning-related anger and boredom” (Sainio et al., 2023, p. 160). Research in this area emphasizes the myriad ways teachers respond to students in low and high track classes, and the impact the teacher-student relationship has on the student’s self-perception. Chapter 4 of this study confirms and adds to the body of research about teachers’ behaviors toward tracked students.

Reform Attempts: Policies and Programs to Remove the Restraints of Tracking

While individual schools have made attempts to shrink the opportunity gap—with significant strides—research shows national efforts to reduce the disparities of the achievement
gap have made little progress (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Chubb & Loveless, 2004). Small-scale reforms like class-size reduction, racially diverse teachers, and detracked classrooms offer promising results in reducing the achievement gap (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Chubb & Loveless, 2004; Jencks & Phillips, 2006). This section of the literature review explores reform attempts to disrupt the opportunity gaps resulting from tracking.

**Open Enrollment**

Open enrollment is one way to combat the effects of inequality associated with tracking; however, the results of this intervention can still advantage racially and socioeconomically privileged groups. When schools adopt open enrollment, students are able to move up in the track system by choosing to enroll in higher tracked classes. In other words, a student enrolled in a low-track math course can enroll in an honors or AP course. A school can simultaneously have tracked classrooms where students are placed in tracks based on their so-called “abilities,” but also have an open-enrollment policy that allows students to enroll in high track courses. In this way, schools avoid the negative connotation associated with tracked classrooms and inequality, instead shining a light on policies that offer students choices when enrolling for courses. Aguilar et al. (2006) describe a scenario where a student is in “an ESL class; a team-taught class; a general, heterogeneous class; or an honors class that prepares him or her to take an AP course in the junior year” (p. 163).

Yet, when school districts implement open-enrollment course scheduling, high-track students were found to opportunity hoard by selecting the more experienced and popular teachers while low-track students selected less-challenging courses (Atteberry et al., 2019; Noguera &
Wing, 2006). For example, a self-scheduling system was implemented at Berkeley High School, to give students a choice in their coursework; students selected their courses by choosing cards of paper with a course name and teacher (Rubin et al., 2006). This system led to inequities when experienced students would hoard the good teachers, leaving unfamiliar students with less-popular and less-challenging instructors (Rubin et al., 2006). Researchers note students who selected low-level courses did so to have less homework and less-intensive instruction (Rubin et al., 2006). Given this research, and previous research about students at diverse schools, high school students do not choose higher track courses without outside influence by counselors or teachers.

Despite assumptions that open enrollment eliminates barriers, research shows student-choice favors students with cultural capital. Collegebound students with the help of their parents chose teachers who are known to be interesting and challenging (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Rubin et al., 2006). “The myth of student choice further camouflages the effects of tracking” (Rubin et al., 2006, p. 41). Researchers see this type of enrollment system as another form of failure for students who will not succeed or barely get by. Research in this section of the literature review further illuminates the fact that reform attempts to fix systems of tracking tend to further perpetuate systems of privilege.

**Detracking**

Based on research presented earlier in this review, one way to fix the harmful effects of racialized classrooms is to implement tracking reform like detracking. When a school detracks it creates skills-heterogenous classrooms, where students of varying skill levels or “abilities” are in
the same classroom (Domina et al., 2019; Rui, 2009). Since research shows that skills-homogeneous classrooms perpetuate social inequality by giving racially and socio-economically privileged groups resources to gain acceptance into college-bound courses, several theorists and researchers recommend eliminating tracking (Atteberry et al., 2019; Gorski, 2018; Oakes, 1985/2005; Oakes & Lipton, 2008). The process of detracking involves teaching students of all learning capabilities within the same classroom, also referred to as skills-heterogenous.

When implemented, detracking reform lessens the racial achievement gap. A district-wide detracking program that began in the 1980s has shown significant promise in reducing the achievement gap (Oakes & Lipton, 2008). Detracking benefitted both former high-track students and those impacted by the effects of the achievement gap (Oakes & Lipton, 2008). Tracking reform may have resulted in a closure of the racial achievement gap between Black and White students and Hispanic and White students (Atteberry et al., 2019).

The literature shows some concern about placing low-performing students in more challenging classes (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Jencks & Phillips, 2006). In secondary math courses—those that often impact a students’ likelihood of meeting university requirements—Domina et al. (2019) argue that while “tempting” data appear to show that “low-ability” math students benefit from skills-heterogeneous classrooms, pointing to the ways detracking has “negative effects” (p. 315). Researchers emphasize the “positive effects of math track exclusiveness and stability on students’ mathematics achievement” as a result of their study (Domina et al., 2019. p. 315).

However, data on success outcomes, compared to low-track classes with “fewer learning opportunities,” demonstrate the benefits of the integrated classroom (Burris & Garrity, 2008, p. 135). The literature shows students in detracked classrooms perform “slightly better” in these
environments (Rui, 2009, p. 168). Theorists suggest reform at individual schools can begin with an examination of gifted, honors, and AP courses to determine gaps in access in these high-level courses (Gorski, 2018). Schools should consider whether or not current reform attempts serve to further perpetuate inequality.

**College-level Tracking Reform**

While research is sparse on community college tracking reform, data on First Generation undergraduate retention serves to interrupt negative trajectories of minority students. To retain undergraduate students in biology programs, values affirming (VA) interventions assisted in minority student success rates in core biology coursework (Harackiewicz et al., 2014). A core gate-keeping course—which leads to 34 biology major programs—traditionally saw low retention rates with First Generation and low SES students. However, after a series of values affirming assignments, First Generation students’ grades improved from C-averages to B-averages and course retention increased by 20%.

**Social Stratification and Tracking**

Published research shows one of the most startling results of tracking is related to employment and unemployment. Gale Thompson’s (2002) study of African American high school students’ responses to education demonstrates students in high-tracked classes will join the middle class, while students in low-tracks will most likely be in the working class. This information relates to the previously mentioned study of the Berkeley High School district where GPA was associated with zip code (Wing, 2006). Researchers discovered lower-waged/salaried
citizens had children with lower GPAs. With this information, one can see how poverty is perpetuated by tracking. Low tracked students receive lower paying jobs and later have children with lower GPAs—which leads to less opportunities for college admissions, lower paying jobs, children with lower GPAs—and the cycle continues.

Marginalized students feeling “fated” by their circumstances come to accept them as “normal” (Greene, 1988, pp. 124-5). Likewise, dominant groups accept their place of privilege in the same way marginalized groups see their placement as predictable (Greene, 1988). Power, in these cases, resides in the form of institutional placement—the social assignments that become normalized in schools. Specific barriers to institutional placement, like standardized exams, further emphasize social assignments. Consider the emphasis placed on SAT exams for scholarships and college entrance—and honors programs, as discussed in this study. Greene sees intelligence testing—and low scores—as a way students have “no hope of achieving freedom” (p. 134).

Stratification in Higher Education

A paradox exists in the purpose and structure of community college, which gives the appearance of an institution that assists with upward mobility—freedom—particularly for first-generation and low-income families. Open-enrollment colleges serve to remove academic and financial barriers set by many collegiate institutions, since they are less-expensive and contain few entrance barriers. However, the lack of academic guidance at community colleges and complex structures can be detrimental to some who fall into debt and do not meet their academic goals (Bailey, et al., 2019; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Research shows most opportunity in
higher education is afforded to students in the dominant culture (Baker et al., 2019; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Outcalt, 1999). Scholars argue that community colleges “have been criticized for hindering educational attainment” (Shavit et al., 2007, p. 167). The problem is that many families see community colleges as an affordable way for their children to “try out” college for the first year, with massive savings to the family. However, based on this research, first-year students who do not follow an articulation agreement between the community college and university will find themselves wasting time and money on courses that do not transfer.

More parents send their children to community college due to the high cost of college tuition. Many families rely on government funding and loan programs to finance college. Beginning in the 1960s, more Americans had access to college through Title IV loans and programs, and financing expanded to students attending community college in the 70s (Shavit et al., 2007). Other government funding for college tuition arrived in the 1970s with the creation of Pell Grants. National Center for Education Statistics (2017-18) data show over 47% of students attending public two-year colleges receive Title IV funding, while 59.5% of four-year college students receive the same funding. In comparing the percentage of students who receive Pell Grant funds, the data is evenly distributed between two and four year colleges, at 41%. In 2017, at public colleges, parents took out $13,600 in Parent Plus loans to pay their child’s tuition, while parents of community college students borrowed $5,900 in Parent Plus loans (all data NCES, 2017-18). Data indicate the real median income in 2017 was $77,713 (Fontenot et al., 2018). Meanwhile, looking at the average Parent Plus loan data for both public and private colleges, parents borrowed 20% of their household income to finance their child’s tuition in 2017 (NCES, 2017-18). The research illustrates severe financial strains on families who carry a new burden of Parent Plus loans on top of other financial aid to cover their child’s tuition costs.
Massive tuition increases since 1980 are reportedly the result of reduced state and federal funding for colleges and universities. Recall from Chapter 1 that data show college tuition costs have gone up 125% since the 1980s (Hout, 2012). Data point to a massive decline in state and federal funding between the 20th and 21st century at research institutions, from 51% of state and federal funds to 10%; therefore, universities rely on student tuition, donations, endowments, and grants (Labaree, 2013). Based on this research, much of the increase in college tuition costs, which falls on families, is due to the reduction in state and federal aid to universities.

High tuition costs create an education marketplace where economically advantaged families can afford elite universities while economically-disadvantaged families have limited choices. Market-driven practices, including attracting tuition dollars to fund universities, leads to highly stratified systems, with open-enrollment community colleges at the bottom tier and private, elite universities at the top (Labaree, 2013). Likewise, the jobs obtained after studying at an institution in a given tier are ranked with the graduating institution's tier. For example, junior college jobs are at the bottom tier and jobs with the greatest social advantage are obtained after attending the top tier institutions like Harvard (Labaree, 2013). The result of the over-stratified system is that privileged groups remain at the top and underprivileged groups pay a premium for social opportunity (Labaree, 2013). Researchers predict inequality in higher education will continue to exist based on the lack of substantial financing available for students in low and middle socioeconomic standing (Shavit et al., 2007). Given this prediction, this study sought to learn how economically disadvantaged community college students described opportunities in honors programs, particularly if these opportunities prove to be gateways to higher tiers.
Community College

The high cost of a four-year college degree is often a driving force for students to choose community college. However, research shows community colleges are under scrutiny for poor college completion numbers (Tinto, 2012). Community college enrollment and program navigation are often self-service, meaning students can enroll in a program without consulting college staff. Community college students face a maze of courses and “poorly explained program, transfer, and career options” (Bailey et al., 2015, p. 3). Research shows that a fifth of all community college students exit before completing ten credits (Bailey, et al., 2015). Researchers discovered that community colleges know little about their incoming students and “students learn little about their college’s available program offerings and related opportunities for transfer or a career” (Bailey, et al., 2015, 56). Researchers looking at precarity—undercurrents that shape how students “engage with their education, make choices, and sustain enrollment”—argue that few students who start at a community college find success there due to “institutional precarity at community colleges and precarity in students’ lives” (Hart, 2019, p. 2). With this information, it is clear that community college students face several struggles in an attempt to advance in their higher education paths.

To increase chances of student success at community college, research demonstrates that concentrated resources to cohorts improves student outcomes. Lin et al. (2020) explain community colleges would benefit from dedicating resources to Black and Hispanic men to encourage associates degree completion. Data in Lin’s study emphasizes equity gaps will narrow in bachelors degree attainment if more emphasis is placed on community college degree attainment for Black and Hispanic students. This data is important to this study since it illustrates
when resources are dedicated to an underrepresented population in community college, an increase in graduation and completion rates should be the outcome.

**Community College Honors Programs**

Research shows the number of college honors programs has grown exponentially since the 1980s—along with the number of entrance barriers. Kane (2001) notes that in 1982 only 47 out of 664 community colleges had honors programs. By the mid-1980s, community college honors programs were seen as transfer partnerships—creating academically prepared students who would better succeed in university programs, including UC Davis (Kane, 2001). Recent estimates now claim that over 1,000 community colleges in the United States have honors programs (Chen, 2020). Honors program entrance requirements vary between baccalaureate and two-year colleges. While only 13% of the community college honors programs required essays or letters in 1999, in 2017, 40% of community colleges have an application essay for their honors program, and 20% of the programs have an interview as part of the application process (Cognard-Black et al., 2017; Outcalt, 1999). Other community colleges require a recommendation from an advisory committee (Floyd & Holloway, 2006). Research indicates at least one community college provides honors programming for all interested students: North Harris Community College in Texas does not restrict enrollment for honors students and is uniquely situated as open enrollment. Trends in the literature show community college honors program entrance barriers have increased over the years, with a few exceptions.

While data show the difficulties degree-seekers face at a community college, studies show myriad benefits from honors enrollment. Community college honors courses boast rigorous
curricula, experiential learning, transfer scholarships, regular colloquia, research seminars, and professional development/administrative support for honors faculty (Floyd & Holloway, 2006). Research shows community college honors students are over 30% more likely to graduate college than non-honors students, are more engaged in challenging programming, and have more access to their professors (Honeycutt, 2019). Community college honors instructors are found to be more experienced and more engaged in “activities related to research and scholarship” than their colleagues in developmental courses (Kisker & Outcalt, 2005, p. 7). Additionally, community college honors programs are described the same way as elite universities which are labeled as having “prestige, resources, and selectivity of both faculty and students” serve to separate elite universities from community colleges (Floyd & Holloway, 2006; Honeycutt, 2019; Shavit et al., 2007, p. 5). An enhanced point of interest is that the honors course proposal process at the study site mirrors the selectivity, cultural and civic engagement offered in other community college honors programs.

At the time of their study, Floyd and Holloway (2006) discovered Midhills Community College, a pseudonym for the location of this study, “boasts that 100 percent of its students completing the Honors Scholar Program successfully transferred to universities” and one became a Rhodes Scholar (p. 46). Outcomes of enrollment in two-year honors programs included higher GPAs at the transfer institution and higher college completion (Kane, 2001). While the literature describes faculty and researchers’ perceptions of the benefits of honors programs, a gap exists in studies emphasizing community college honors students’ perceptions. Information about the benefits of community college honors programs support one of this study’s research questions: How do socially-marginalized first-time honors students describe the opportunities they gain while studying in the honors program?
Transfer Agreements in Honors Programs

In his popular book on completing college, Tinto (2012) suggests that institutions should examine factors and programs that lead to college completion. Tinto informs readers that institutions should analyze patterns of student progression all the way to degree completion. To study how researchers are analyzing patterns of success and completion within honors programs at their institutions, transfer data help illustrate patterns of success.

Research demonstrates certain predictive facts, like honors enrollment and high grade point averages, influence the likelihood of a community college honors student transferring to a university. Empirical studies identify a correlation between higher GPA and honors transfer students during their early semesters at the transfer institution (Phillips, 2008; Thomas et al., 2019). Universities are reaching down to community colleges in order to reduce transfer shock: a drop in GPA upon transferring to a four-year institution (Phillips, 2008). In a study comparing honors and non-honors community college students, data show less community college honors students experience transfer shock (Phillips, 2008). Despite equal GPA means in the last semester of community college enrollment, first semester transfer students from honors programs have higher GPA scores than non-honors students from community colleges, with a mean difference of almost three-tenths (Phillips, 2008). The data demonstrate transfer shock is a greater challenge for non-honors students transferring to a university.
Retention and Completion Rates

Research shows honors program enrollment contributes to college completion (Bowman & Culver, 2018; Honeycutt, 2019; Thomas et al., 2018). Even though a multi-institutional study of undergraduates in college and university honors programs shows honors enrollment correlates with completion, honors enrollment does not contribute to overall satisfaction (Bowman & Culver, 2018). Retention in universities may not directly associate with honors enrollment, since researchers suggest “students with high academic achievement and academically-oriented attitudes are likely to be retained regardless of their participation” (Bowman & Culver, 2018, pp. 265-6). In other words, the honors cohort might possess behaviors aligned with four-year college completion goals, absent the influence of the honors program.

In contrast to research on community college honors student success rates at transfer institutions, two-year college honors programs struggle with retention and high-failure rates (Byrne, 1998; Cognard-Black et al., 2017). Two-year college honors programs have lower retention rates: “a mean of 68% second-year retention compared to roughly 85% for four-year institutions” (Cognard-Black et al., 2017, p. 241). Persistence measures are impacted by high transfer rates after the first year of attendance at community colleges. While community colleges have fewer enrollment requirements for their honors programs, they see lower retention rates in honors programs than universities. Bowman and Culver (2018) note that previous research may have overestimated the potential impact honors enrollment has on students’ outcomes and experiences. This study seeks to uncover students’ perceptions on the impact of honors enrollment and to further understand community college honors students’ future plans.
Students’ Perceptions of Honors Courses

Research on student perceptions focuses on secondary education, noting distinct differences in the way students view their peers in honors and non-honors courses (Legette, 2018; Shaunessey & McHatton, 2009). Not only are non-honors students associated with negative perceptions, but students also view teacher support as less effective in lower-tracked courses, while honors courses are viewed as more challenging (Shaunessey & McHatton, 2009). As previously mentioned, middle school students perceive those placed in honors as intelligent, while non-honors students are seen as disruptive (Legette, 2018). Students describe a more intensive workload and more compassionate teachers in honors programs (Henfield et al., 2014). Students indicate three factors enhance honors curricula and create a challenging learning environment: “autonomy, complexity, and teacher expectations” (Scager et al., 2013, p. 129).

High school students describe their honors courses as stressful with more work than non-honors courses (Smith, 2008). Smith’s qualitative study reveals students perceive honors learners as intelligent and well-behaved. High school students describe a variety of teachers—from disengaged to those who “go above and beyond to assist student learning” (Shaunessy & McHatton, 2008, p. 497). Unlike students in other tracks, honors high school students felt empowered to bring attention to teachers who were not measuring up to their perceived standards.

Students describe their decision to enroll in college honors courses as heavily influenced by their parents. Students also say they enroll in honors courses to experience challenging curricula and scholarship opportunities. College students explain one major reason for enrolling in honors is parental views (Henfield et al., 2014). Along with setting and achieving goals,
meeting parents’ expectations was a phenomenon attributed to Asian American honors students (Henfield et al., 2014). Community college students enroll in honors courses to engage in dialogue with like-minded colleagues (Chen, 2020). Other reasons for honors enrollment include scholarship opportunities and more access to faculty (Chen, 2020; Honeycutt, 2019). Despite research on teachers’ perceptions on why community college honors students choose these programs, there is a gap in qualitative data making meaning out of interviews with community college honors students.

In the research reviewed in this chapter, not a single study sought to hear from first-time honors students at a community college. The review of literature shows a need for marginalized students’ voices, specifically when studying community college honors programs. Trends show the honors programs provide challenging courses that enhance students’ critical thinking and global understanding but given the emphasis on the negative effects of tracking, this study listens to students’ perspectives. What about the students who did not get into high-tracked classes in high school? What about the students who had no other option but to attend community college, based on minimal family assets and government aid? How do these students describe the effects of tracking? These chapters offer answers.

Summary

The research demonstrates that tracking has been a topic of conversation since the late 1800s. As this literature review revealed, tracking in secondary education enhances barriers for students in the margins while perpetuating systems of privilege for those in already privileged racial and socioeconomic groups. Research demonstrates that tracking creates a roadblock for
upward mobility (Kozol, 1997; Noguera and Wing, 2006; Oakes, 1985/2005). Low-track placement often acts as a barrier, preventing underprivileged students from university enrollment (Boykin et. al, 2006; Gorski, 2018). Research also suggests that students form identities of themselves and their peers based on track placement (Legette, 2018; Smith, 2008). Despite extensive studies on tracking, a deficit of research is present in the field of marginalized community college students taking honors courses for the first time.

Other barriers for college entrance include the trappings of the stratified higher education system. The literature reveals universities are dependent on student tuition after a change in state and federal funding in the 1980s (Labaree, 2013), and community colleges often serve vulnerable populations of students. More affluent families who afforded resources like test-prep tutors and houses in areas with higher per-pupil funding have children with higher GPAs and test scores, and often send their children to higher tiered universities. Meanwhile, the literature shows students in low and middle-class families rely on federal aid, and/or student and parent loans to finance their degrees. For these reasons, students turn to community college as an affordable option. An obvious gap in research regarding economically disadvantaged students placed emphasis on the need to study this population.

Research demonstrates students who cannot attend a four-year college yet still seek more challenging curricula often enroll in community college honors programs. However, a trend exists in entrance into community college honors programs, which often require the same GPA and test score requirements as research universities. The literature shows honors enrollment in community college has myriad academic benefits and contributes to success upon transfer to a university (Bowman & Culver, 2018; Chen, 2020; Cognard-Black et al., 2017; Honeycutt, 2019). At the time of writing, no research existed on first-time honors students in community colleges.
Therefore, this study attempts to fill the gap in literature on community college honors students who are taking honors courses for the first time.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Given the trends in the literature which point to ways tracking puts socially marginalized students at a greater disadvantage with college placement, coupled with the research on the difficulties community college students face with financing higher education, it became important to investigate one community college cohort known for successful outcomes: honors students. Unfortunately, the literature review reveals a deficit in studies featuring community college honors students’ perspectives. This study sought to discover what happens when students who originally did not have the power to enroll in a secondary education honors program chose to place themselves in community college honors spaces. Due to the exploratory underpinning of this study’s research design, qualitative research was the best way to examine data on this topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To capture first-time honors students’ experiences, this study utilized in-depth interviews, digital diaries, and documents, which are explained in this chapter.

The purpose of this study was to learn from community college students who broke through the barriers to enter honors spaces. The researcher sought to discover the driving force behind community college students’ choice to enroll in honors. In addition, the study sought to learn how first-time honors students depicted their expectations and experiences. The following questions were the catalyst for research:
1) How do socially marginalized students entering honors courses in community college for the first time experience barriers and break through barriers, if any?

2) What opportunities do socially marginalized students gain in community college honors courses?

3) How are first-time honors students’ identities shaped by tracking?

Research Design: Case Study

Case studies allow researchers the opportunity to present a rich, detailed, and complete understanding of the complexities of a particular case and/or issue (Creswell, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case studies are used to investigate a phenomenon within its setting and context “when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (Yin, 2018). Findings can include a description of the case and themes or issues uncovered in studying the case (Creswell, 2013). The conclusion of a case study often serves to demonstrate the overall meaning derived from the case. For this study, the researcher chose case study due to the characteristics of its design and ability to offer a deep understanding of a research topic, identify themes, issues, and/or specific situations. In this single-case, three data collection tools were used to corroborate findings: interviews, digital diaries, and documents.

Research Site

This single-institution study focused on a large suburban community college near Chicago. The college and the county where it resides will be referred as Midhills, a pseudonym.
The college is set in an affluent suburb, with a median household income of $110,678 (US Census, 2021). The college offers an in-district tuition rate for students living within Midhills County at $144 per credit hour, or just over $1,728 a semester for in-district students taking four three-credit hour classes. Nearly 77% of Midhills County’s population identifies as white, while 5% identify as African American. Around 12% of the county’s population is Asian, while 14% is Hispanic/Latintx (US Census, 2021). The student population at Midhills Community College is different from the county itself. In Spring 2021, 51% of Midhills Community College was white, 21% Hispanic/Latintx, 15% Asian, 4% Black, 4% identified as other, and 4% of those surveyed did not identify their race (Midhills CC R&A, Feb. 2021). Forty-percent of the college population receives Pell Grant funding (Midhills Equity and Access Team, 2020, Feb. 6) while only 20% of the honors program receives Pell funds (Midhills R&A, Oct. 2021). Data from 2016 to 2021 on first-semester honors students is represented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Midhills Community College New Honors Students from 2016-2021**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Unduplicated New Honors Student Head Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or More Races</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Within the past five years, Midhills’s honors program changed from a manual application process to self-enrollment, where students register for an honors course without any prior contact with the honors chairperson or an advisor. GPA and SAT scores are the current entrance
requirement for Midhills’s honors courses. According to the Honors webpage: “a student must complete eight (8) hours or more of college-level coursework and earn a cumulative GPA of 3.2/4.0 or higher. Students who have not completed eight (8) hours of college-level coursework must meet one of the following criteria: high school cumulative GPA of 3.5/4.0 or a composite SAT score of 1200 or a composite ACT score of 25.”

Prior to January 2017, students went through a manual admissions process that required an entrance essay and completed paperwork from either the honors director or an admissions counselor. In the fall of 2016, honors faculty voted to change the manual system. Since that vote, anyone eligible for honors can enroll without going through the old manual approval process. Midhills’s IT Department and the program director streamlined the honors admissions so any student who meets the GPA or SAT/ACT requirements will be notified they qualify for honors. This same system triggers a list of qualified students to the honors director, who then emails the eligible students. Continuing students who earned eight credit hours with a GPA of 3.2 or higher automatically qualify for honors courses. Additionally, students can enroll in an honors course with an e-permit from a professor if they do not meet the GPA/test requirements. Honors students are also invited to take non-honors courses for honors credit with the use of an honors contract. In this agreement, students complete an additional independent research project that is presented to the class by the end of the semester. The contract is a working document among the honors student, faculty instructor, and the honors director.
Participants

The study located how socially-marginalized community college students taking honors courses for the first time perceived their past experiences with tracking, current opportunities in community college honors, and ways tracking impacts identity. Students in the study had to be: 1) taking honors for the first time (in other words, they did not take honors in high school), and 2) identify as socially marginalized (excluded from mainstream society for economic, racial, cultural, religious, or other factors). Students in this single-institution case are from Midhills Community College. Participants included Pell Grant recipients, and those who identified as marginalized by race, religion, or other reasons. Reflecting the community college population, participants were between 18 and 30 and were from varying racial and gender backgrounds. The researcher gathered data from seven participants meeting the criteria for the study; however, one participant’s data was not used after the participant was determined as ineligible for previous IB coursework.

Pell eligibility is determined by a number of factors including income, size, number of college students in the family, and other factors (College Foundation, n.d.). As of the last collection of data from Midhills, seventy-two students taking an honors course in their first semester of college were Pell Grant recipients (Midhills R&A, Oct., 2021). Data also show 12.6% of the merit-based scholars taking honors for the first time in college also receive Pell Grant funds. Participants in this study did not receive a scholarship to attend Midhills. Those in the study included many who were working in order to pay for school (Bailey et al., 2015).

First-time honors students will be defined as those taking an honors course for the first time at Midhills Community College and those who were in low- or middle-tracked courses—
not enrolled in honors, AP, or IB courses in high school. Participants took or were taking at least one honors course at the time of the study. Table 2 illustrates the participants’ demographic information along with the number of honors courses taken at Midhills at the time of the study.

Table 2: Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Parents’ Education</th>
<th>Number of CC Honors Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haley</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Bi-Racial</td>
<td>Did not complete college</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amina</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>South-Asian</td>
<td>Bachelor’s and Master’s Degree earners</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidney</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Did not complete college</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>Did not complete college</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Researcher Positionality

As an honors faculty member at Midhills Community College, the researcher has worked with hundreds of honors students over eight years. The researcher teaches Honors Composition II often with the thematic focus of social justice, in which texts create a conversation about counternarratives in society. During the time of the study, the researcher taught an Honors
Composition II course using Sarah Stitzlein’s research on hope, where students analyzed issues through a lens of hopeful habits, while also noting bad habits in society.

Because of the researcher’s insider status, she was careful to remain objective during interviews (Weiss, 1994) to avoid influencing respondents’ answers; she also interviewed students during the fall, when she was not teaching honors. Additionally, the researcher ensured that the participants were not her former students. The researcher is also an outsider in the honors environment as a student since her high school did not have honors courses. When the researcher pursued undergraduate studies at a private university in Chicago in the nineties, they did not have honors courses. The researcher’s high school did not use tracked course titles like advanced or honors. In fact, the researcher’s high school—just miles from the study site and within the community college district—did not have an honors program, nor did they offer AP courses. Given this information, it is evident that the researcher was not impacted by the honors/non-honors dichotomy currently held in high school settings, which elevates her role as an outsider in tracked settings.

Data Gathering

Accuracy in case study research is enhanced when interviews, documents, and other artifacts all lead to similar findings. In case study research, all evidence is data and, in order to illustrate a case, more than one source of evidence is necessary (Gillham, 2000). Gillham explains how qualitative researchers gather facts to illustrate a phenomenon, like tracking and honors, and theory is applied in order to explain the facts. Three data gathering tools were used within a one-month collection period to gather facts about first-time honors students’ perspectives about their experiences with tracking and honors. The researcher conducted the first
interviews after a sample population was located through an email inquiry. Interviews took place on Zoom and face-to-face. At the end of the interviews, participants were shown how to access their Google Folders and record/upload their digital diaries. The diaries were recorded off-site and uploaded to a participant-specific Google Folder. Most interviews and digital diaries were completed within two weeks, with some extending three weeks as the digital diaries were being recorded. Data collection began during the summer of 2022, with Haley’s interview. Other participants were interviewed in the beginning of the Fall 2022 semester, extending into October, 2022.

To maintain consistency while gathering evidence, participants were assigned a Google Drive folder labeled Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, etc. Each participant folder contained the same documents. The first document is a Google Form asking the participant their race, parents’ education level, high school course enrollment, and number of honors courses taken so far at the community college level. The second item in the folder contained the three separate audio and/or video diary prompts in Google Slides. At the end of the prompts and questions (see Appendix A), participants were given instructions on how to upload an mp3 or mp4 file to their assigned Google Folder. All participants, except Daniel, submitted their digital diary recordings. During the interview, Daniel revealed that he was awaiting a kidney transplant and on disability. The researcher did not want to bother Daniel for the digital diary recordings given his medical diagnosis.
Interviews

The first data gathering tool is interviews, which will serve to answer all three research questions. Interviews are known as a way to make meaning of other people’s experiences (Seidman, 2006). In this study, interviews were conducted face-to-face in the researcher’s office at Midhills and through Zoom. Face-to-face conversations were recorded through the Voice Recorder iPhone application. Zoom sessions were recorded through the virtual conferencing platform. All recordings will be stored on the researcher’s protected Google Drive for three years.

The interviews were conducted in two parts. All participants chose to complete both parts of the interview in one sitting, except Haley whose interview took place the summer of 2022. The first part of the interview emphasized what Seidman calls the “focused life history” (p. 17). By reaching back to past experiences during interviews, the researcher heard how students described their non-honors courses and effects of tracking, answering the first research question about barriers.

Part Two of the interview contained more personal questions. Part Two focused on the present and future experiences, including the ways students’ identities were shaped by honors enrollment. Some interview questions asked students to reflect on the opportunities offered in the honors program. Other questions addressed domain specific identity—non-honors in high school and honors in college—and served to answer the study’s third research question about the ways student’s identities are shaped based on their academic setting.
Digital Diaries

The second data gathering tool is digital diaries recorded by students on their own devices. Participants were given the option to record with or without video to ensure a safe space for students to share their experiences. The purpose of the second data gathering tool was to provide participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences prior to and during community college honors enrollment. Because contact with participants is a key component in data collection with video diaries (Jones, 2014), the researcher chose to explain the diary prompts at the end of the first interview. At that time, the researcher showed students how to access the diary prompts on Google Drive, as well as how to record and upload their responses. Students had three weeks to complete the diaries.

Each diary prompt illuminated one of the three research questions. Since the digital diaries were recorded in a setting absent the researcher, questions are related to emotions, feelings, and beliefs as participants reflect on their experiences. Because recorded diaries act as a silent interviewer (Chism, 2020), meaning-making questions deepened the researcher’s understanding of a student’s choice to take honors and participate in extracurricular activities. A question about the ways honors enrollment contributes to perceived future experiences facilitated a dialectical space for students to make meaning of their life-world. All participant’s names were masked to protect their privacy.
Documents

To answer the second research question about opportunities in honors, documents will be used to corroborate findings. To corroborate students’ responses, it is important to locate the ways the honors program communicates those opportunities and hear how students perceive those experiences. Synthesizing the documents with the diary and interview responses provides a unique opportunity to give students the chance to visually see the various out-of-class opportunities in honors and reflect on their involvement.

Looking back at the literature review, researchers investigate how honors faculty describe ways honors programs benefit students. However, it is important to compare the various ways the honors program facilitates opportunities with how students use meaning-making to reflect on their participation. To corroborate ways students describe the various opportunities in the honors program, documents and artifacts sent and distributed by the honors program were to confirm the facts. In the recorded diaries, students looked at various flyers promoting opportunities and activities in the honors program on campus and answer questions about their participation. The images of flyers in the second digital diary prompt included the following activities: a private art discussion and tour with a popular visual artist, a brochure on transfer scholarships, and Honors Student Advisory Committee Meeting flyer, two transfer scholarship applications, a transfer scholarship flyer for a private local university, a flyer for the Honors Contract, a popcorn fundraiser, and a Celebration of Student Excellence brochure. Additional external documents in the digital diary prompts included the Midhills Honors Scholarship webpage, and the Honors Council of the Illinois Region flyer.
Data Analysis

This section describes how interviews and recorded diaries were stored, transcribed, and coded. Additionally, it details coding strategies. Finally, this section approaches issues and solutions associated with the research design.

Storage and Transcription

The researcher stored the digital diaries and interviews on Google Drive and used Temi to transcribe both data gathering tools. Chism (2020) used the websites Temi and Rev to store and transcribe data. The researcher paid the transcription services for Temi from her own funds. With each transcription, the researcher developed individual codes that later transformed into overarching codes, described below.

Coding

Transcribed interviews and audio recordings—herein referred to as digital diaries—were coded using themes from the literature and later organized into three columns pertaining to the three research questions. Coding the data assisted the researcher in locating which research question the data responded to.

In this case study, the researcher actively contributed to the results of the data during the coding process. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain that researchers develop “a list of coding categories after the data have been collected” (p. 173). Seidman (2006) notes he does not read the transcripts with a prepared set of categories, instead he focuses on information that piques his
interest, locating patterns within the data. Researchers using theory tend to begin the study with categories of inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Predetermined theory codes based on the literature review were assigned to the data, including honors identity, non-honors identity, behaviors, financial barriers, financing college, applying for college, and financial aid—among others. Codes that emerged from the data included barriers (economic, FAFSA, and tuition), middle school influence on college, enrollment decisions in high school and college, additional courses needed for track movement, honors classroom setting, behavior in honors: confident, scholarships, SAT influence on identity, track assignments and identity, race-based labels, decision making outside of a student’s control, cultural capital (lack of), and assumption about honors versus reality. The codes that emerged from the data helped the research locate trends in what participants were saying, particularly about the labels assigned to tracked students and the various ways track assignments are outside a student’s control. After coding the data, it became clear just how little freedom these students had over primary and secondary school academic choices—and how the lack of choice deeply impacted how they saw their future opportunities.

While transcribing data, the researcher was surprised to find that teachers’ behaviors toward low-track students was a prominent code, as was “imposter syndrome” in the honors classroom. This code later became feelings of inadequacies when analyzing the data. Once all of the data were coded, the researcher created separate Google Docs for each theme. She then used the copy/paste function in Google to copy all of the theme-coded data from each transcription and paste it into one document. With six two-part interviews, around 20 minutes per part, and 15 digital diary recordings, this process allowed the researcher adequate organization to begin to form sections in Chapter 4. For example, under the Barriers document, the researcher created subthemes and pasted all responses related to each subtheme, like “barriers with affording
Within that subtheme, the researcher used P1, P2, etc. to label each quotation. This also allowed the researcher to synthesize the voices together to tell a more collective story about each subtheme, and to connect participants’ quotations together.

**Convergence of Evidence**

Case study research has been criticized for invalid findings due to methods of data collection; however, qualitative theorists rebuke claims of invalidity by placing emphasis on triangulation of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). In terms of quality, triangulated data is rated more highly. Yin (2014) suggests “any case study finding or conclusion is likely to be more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information following a similar convergence of evidence” (p. 120). Data triangulation assists in creating a “commonality of an assertion” (Stake, 1995, p. 112). With triangulated data, converging lines of inquiry lead to accuracy. In other words, “[m]ultiple sources of evidence essentially provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (Yin, 2014, p. 121). In this study, interviews, audio and/or video diaries, and documents converged to form a more succinct conclusion about first-time honors students’ experiences with tracking and perceived opportunities in honors.

**Conclusion**

This chapter offers a justification for the research methods employed in this study, including in-depth interviews, digital diaries, and document corroboration. Socially marginalized
first-time honors students from Midhills Community College participated in a two-part interview, recorded three digital diaries, and reflected on documents from the honors program. Based on the definitions, explanations, and proposals in this chapter, and the literature on tracking and stratification extending into higher education presented in Chapter 2, this study sought fill in a deficit in research. By hearing the perspectives of marginalized first-time honors students at Midhills Community College, the study reveals how students describe barriers to college entrance, opportunities in honors, and the impact of tracking on their identities.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter offers data and interpretation of the findings after interviews and digital diaries were coded and analyzed. The chapter is divided by themes that emerged from each of the three research questions. The study’s first research question addresses the barriers socially-marginalized community college students faced in high school. The question also locates ways participants broke through barriers.

Experiencing and Breaking Through Barriers

While some privileged socio-economic groups can afford college tuition, and other racial groups were tracked high and met the qualifications for college entrance, socially marginalized students in this study experienced barriers to college success. The barriers students faced ranged from financial barriers like being unable to afford college-preparatory resources, or more internalized barriers like feeling the burden of negative labels assigned by primary and secondary educators.

Negative Labels Assigned by Teachers

The participants in the study described the way teachers acted as barriers to higher track courses based on the way they labeled students in low tracks. By emphasizing ways students in low and middle track courses were not trying hard enough, students expressed how they
internalized labels that made them believe they were not good enough for higher tracked courses—and college. Both Daniel and Sidney had been out of high school for at least seven years, and Sidney explained that her teachers had a negative impact on her ability to prepare for college:

A lot of my teachers were unfortunately pretty discouraging. I had a lot of teachers tell me that ‘Oh, it's okay like some people just aren't meant to be in academics. Like some people just aren't meant to, you know, some people just can't do, math and that's okay. You know, it's okay if you have to go into the trades or something.’ I had a school counselor tell me that I shouldn't try to like go to a major school <laugh> because like, ‘oh, well, you know, students, like you, it seems like you wouldn't be very successful.’ (interview)

Sidney’s response illustrates how students are shaped to follow a career path deemed appropriate by people in positions of authority. Being labeled as a student who “wouldn’t be very successful” in high school tells the student they do not belong in an academic environment. Likewise, Daniel’s high school teacher stereotyped his group of friends for their Mexican-American heritage. Daniel explained:

It's kind of like expected of young Mexican Americans to be more ‘street’ I guess. If we did well in schools, like, ‘Oh wow, you're doing a good job type thing.’ It even came to a point where a teacher, she said, ‘Oh, well, you know, they don't expect much of you Mexican boys, so you'll probably get a lot of like scholarships and stuff like that.’ She was trying to motivate me, but I mean, just seeing it now, it's kind of like low. (interview)

While Daniel attempts to diffuse his teacher’s oppressive behavior by turning his experience into a positive teaching moment, claiming his teacher was trying to “motivate” him, it is clear that the teacher was using a racial stereotype to label Daniel. Research on counter-culture groups explains how teachers who belittle students represent “one of the most oppressive forces” (Willis, 1977, p. 77). Other participants describe the negative impact this type of belittling had on their self-image. Similar to the way Daniel diffused the problem, Jordan explains that his
primary school teachers meant well, but the impact of the stereotypes assigned to students based on course tracking was damaging. Jordan said,

Like in elementary school I don't know if they still do that or not, but the ACE program, you're at the top of the class. It's a delineation and there's no acknowledgement ... of the barriers to achieving those things. And, and it's sort of a system that perpetuates people who have those opportunities and resources to stay at the top. And I think that the things that teachers say about people in this sense are just sort of a reflection of that. They're internalizing this system.

Jordan is well-aware that the way teachers label and rank students in elementary school by calling the top academic performers “ACE” students. Given the distance between Jordan’s elementary years and the time of the study, the researcher located updated information about ACE. A Google search offered an elementary school in the northern suburbs of Chicago, near the area Jordan grew up. On the school’s website, ACE is defined as a program for “high-ability children” with modified learning up to two grade levels above the student’s placement. Jordan’s acknowledgement of the way the school celebrated students in ACE has another layer of meaning, since he now recognizes the way social and financial resources contribute to advanced placement. By pointing out the “people who have those opportunities and resources stay at the top” Jordan is aware of not only how advanced placement students benefit from social capital, but also how students stay in high placement in the stratified education system. His response mirrors Foucauldian power theories, which suggest subjects are placed in social systems based on how they measure up and against social norms.

Jordan explained ways the labels still have an impact today. In his digital diary recording, Jordan shared some of the comments teachers made to his parents about his performance in school:

But he doesn’t do homework. He doesn't pay attention in class. And so that also I think contributed to that inferiority complex of like, I will never be a good student, so why
would I even try. Just kind of being told I'm not doing something right my whole life, no one considered, I think I internalized it to reject the whole system.

Similar to the way Sidney’s teachers spoke to her, Jordan rejected school because his teachers told him he was not good enough. While other students in the study were not directly told they were not good enough, Amina recalls the way her teachers made her feel inferior and incompetent by constantly comparing her non-honors cohort to honors students.

Amina added to the discussion about ranking in schools:

Teachers, even if they didn't do it intentionally would sometimes compare us regular non-honors students with their honor classes, saying that if we couldn't complete assignments on time, they were baffled because their honors classes had even more homework than us and they still did it. And it just made us feel as if there was something wrong with us that we couldn't do it.

Based on the findings, the way schools rank students’ classes by so-called ability grouping has a significant negative impact on low and middle-tracked students. Those in lower track classes are subjected to feeling inferior to students in high track courses—and are often discouraged by their teachers’ remarks. Not only do students experience feelings of inferiority as a result of low and middle track placement, but their family’s socio-economic status further contributes to feelings of ostracization, which is covered in the next section.

Barriers to Peer-to-Peer Interactions

In this section, socially marginalized people living below the poverty level described the challenges they faced when interacting with other students. Participants in study were made fun of when they did not have new school supplies. Other disadvantaged students grew up in
households where one financial set-back, like a washing machine breaking, led to peers making fun of their dirty clothing.

Sidney explained that her father made less than $20,000 per year and her mother did not work. She described the way she was alienated by teachers and peers because she attended school in dirty clothing:

I would get bullied for not having new clothes, like our washing machine and dryer broke for a long time and we couldn't fix it. So I got made fun of a lot for having dirty clothes. I think it really affected my classes, especially because people didn't really wanna listen to me ‘cuz they were like, “Oh, look at you. You're not like clean, like whatever, like you don't obviously—you don't know anything."

Similar to the way her teachers labeled her as someone who did not belong in school—someone who didn’t try hard enough and wasn’t successful enough—her peers fed her similar messages to outcast her from the dominant group. By pointing out Sidney’s unwashed clothing, her peers are drawing attention to something outside of her control. Her parents could not afford to fix the washing machine, so she had to wear soiled clothing. The circumstances of poverty led to traumatizing social situations in school.

Growing up in poverty also contributed to the participants feeling outcast by their peers. Because Sidney’s family could not afford new school supplies—and they did not have a computer at home—Sidney explained that she was made fun of. Without a solution to her lack of financial resources, Sidney said she was “discouraged to even bring them [school supplies] in at that point. Cause I was like, ah, well, you know, even if I bring them in, people are gonna look at me and like, ‘oh, oh look at that ratty old binder that you've been using for like 10 years.’” This is the third example of evidence to show how Sidney, a student growing up in poverty, was not accepted by the dominant culture. Sidney’s family could not afford new school supplies, and since she did not want to be made fun of for having a used binder, she chose not to bring school
supplies to class. The student is then less-prepared to participate in daily educative activities. In some cases, teachers take away points when students do not have the right school supplies. In this third example, the evidence shows how Sidney once again is being shown that she does not belong in school.

Like participants in other sections of this chapter, transportation is a heavy burden for students whose families are financially disadvantaged, whether it’s the stress of paying for gasoline or the heavy financial burden of owning more than one car. Amina described how living in an economically disadvantaged household made her feel ashamed, which led her to withdraw from participation. In an interview, Amina shared:

I guess financially it was just, and I think if I talked about it more openly, the advisors or the faculty would have helped helped me, but it was just that kind of subconscious level of shame that I don't wanna tell anyone—or embarrassment. So especially cause honors student have to participate more. They have a lot of afterschool activities and it's just better to be more involved in honor societies and stuff like that. And I couldn't commit since our family only had one car, and it would be super busy, and no one would have the time.

While Amina’s financial situation is not as disadvantaged as Sidney’s, the data show how students living in poverty are well-aware of the way the lack of financial resources excludes them from social groups. Amina does not participate in extracurricular activities because she does not have transportation—because her parents cannot afford a second car.

Jordan noted that even in community college, he still struggles with the trauma of growing up in poverty, which he sees as a barrier to interacting with peers. Jordan explained how he struggles to form lasting friendships:

It's hard to feel the energy to talk to people when I'm stressed out about all these different things...on top of all the trauma and dealing with all that past stuff, it's just an endless loop...here's all this stuff coming back to me that happened when I was younger. So a lot of that trauma relates back to poverty and being homeless and just stuff like that too. Um, so it's hard to fit in with people is my point. It's hard to make friends.
Findings show that students with less financial resources than their peers feel excluded from the dominant peer groups. Economically disadvantaged students in the study felt ashamed about financial disadvantages like being unable to afford new school supplies or a second family car to shuttle to extracurricular activities. Students living below the poverty line still struggle with trauma from being home insecure in secondary school. Besides their lack of financial resources, students in the study report a lack of cultural capital as a barrier to college success, which is presented in the next section.

Parents’ Educational and Social Class Status as a Barrier to College

This section of the findings reveals ways students who lack cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) miss out on important advantages like having a parent who completed college assist with navigating college prep-exams and applications. A large percentage of community college students lack cultural capital as first-generation students—those whose parents did not graduate with a college degree (Hart, 2019). In this study, only Amina’s parents graduated college. The other five participants share similar stories of the way they felt their families did not prioritize education given their parents lack of experiences in higher education.

Daniel described how his father dedicated his time to working rather than schoolwork, while Haley explained her father was a college track athlete who did not graduate and described her mother as a “worker.” Haley saw the lack of cultural capital as intertwined with social class and explained how she had less opportunity to prepare for college entrance exams:

I feel like maybe not having just resources, not prioritizing education is a very common lower-middle class thing to do. At least in my family, that's what I've seen. There was never any extra stuff. Like my mom did pay for the SAT prep course. But because I did
really bad on the test and she's like, “Well, I paid for the course. So I'm not buying another test for you.”

What’s problematic about Haley’s response is that she is perpetuating socio-economic stereotypes created in society. The fact that she regurgitates the bogus narrative that lower-middle class families do not prioritize education is harmful, since it shows how she has accepted this narrative as her own. The collective stereotype becomes Haley’s reason for why she wasn’t offered another opportunity to take an SAT exam, as if it is the fault of her family for being lower class. Instead, SAT courses and tests should not be at a cost to students. Students should be able to take the tests as often as possible. Money cannot be the reason why students are not scoring well on college entrance exams.

Sidney said her parents could not help with her homework. Although her father had taken some college coursework, her mother was her main caretaker. She noted:

I just always struggled in class because I felt like nobody was willing to sit with me and work through it with me. Especially, you know, unfortunately my parents were, like my dad was college educated, but my mom wasn't and usually my mom would help me. So, she had no knowledge, like she didn't really graduate out of college, so she tried to help me.

In this response, Sidney also perpetuates a stereotype of the stay-at-home mother who cannot help with homework, the brainless at-home type who only knows how to care for her family.

Daniel described a similar situation, where his family placed emphasis on dedication in the workforce over schoolwork:

My father had a very strong work ethic, very young. He came to the United States at 17 lived with no family here, so he's had a very hard upbringing. Once he came here, he was able to save. He always lived below his means. The bills were always paid, but that...affects the way you see other things, like for example, school. For them [his parents] it was like, yeah, school is important, but they didn't understand why.
While Daniel’s response indicated his pride in his father’s emphasis on hard work, he reflected on the way he wished his parents were more involved in his academics. Daniel’s response perpetuates stereotypes about immigrant working class families. His response does not take into account the fact that his family’s socioeconomic standing contributed to their social situation and the way Daniel’s father to work hard to pay the bills. Daniel saw their lack of involvement as one of the reasons he didn’t try to excel in secondary school:

And my parents weren't really involved. I'm sure if they would've been on me about school a little bit more and like involved I'm sure probably could have had the opportunity, like my grades didn’t go upward...So, it's a matter of opportunity then and influence...Just like culturally, not having the experience from someone else to rely on, not having someone that's been in it, you know, it makes it a little difficult. It's like you're going into the unknown without any, any support...So, I guess that would be one barrier.

In Daniel’s response he emphasizes that the lack of his parents’ involvement in his schooling contributed to his lower grades; however, he is perpetuating society’s stereotype about low-income and immigrant families who do not care about school. If we feed into this narrative, it helps society look at immigrant and low-income groups as the cause of their own hardships, rather than blaming the social structures and the way stratification keeps people trapped in socio-economic classes.

As a community college student taking honors courses for the first time, Jordan also pointed to his family’s hardships as a reason why he couldn’t fill out financial aid forms. He notes the way his parents faced their own barriers to completing college, including his mother’s pregnancy in high school and his father who did not complete college.

My mom got pregnant, uh, in high school, so with my, with my oldest brother. So, you know, college was never an option for her with raising kids and stuff and, you know, all that, all that. So that was really hard. Um, I didn't even know how to apply. I didn't know what the FAFSA was.
Jordan’s comments about reasons why his mother did not attend college are padded with the underlying issue—a lack of cultural capital. Since Jordan’s mother did not attend college or complete a FAFSA form, Jordan did not have a parent to help him fill out the application to reduce the financial burden of college. Jordan’s parents chose to raise a child, so, as Jordan says, his mother could not go to college. Due to their choice to start a family early, their son could not fill out financial aid forms. When stated plainly, the obvious fissures in the financial aid system spring forth.

The FAFSA form should not have been so complicated that Jordan would point to his baby brother as a reason why he could not fill out a FAFSA form. Financial aid is intended to give families who cannot afford to pay tuition a means to other financial resources, like loans and grants. However, if a family in poverty also lacks cultural capital, the FAFSA form acts as a barrier to access financial resources. Other barriers, including a lack of financial resources to pay for college admissions applications and exams, are presented in the next section.

**Financial Barriers**

Economically marginalized students in this study explained how their families were unable to afford extra resources to assist with college entrance barriers including SAT tutors and extra exams and college application fees. Haley described how her family made financial decisions that supported her athletic career—but that came at a price. Haley says, “My mom was spending money on softball rather than spending money on a private tutor.” Here Haley points to a trend in social class privilege. Wealthier families can afford college-prep tutors while low-
income families cannot. The tutors placed more affluent students at an advantage over their financially disadvantaged peers with college-entrance barriers like SAT exams.

For economically marginalized students whose families cannot afford college tuition, high SAT exam scores represent one criterion for merit-based scholarships. In this case, students who need scholarships because their families cannot afford college are the same students who have less of an advantage to get scholarships because their families cannot afford the out-of-pocket costs for exam retakes, or the hourly rate of an SAT test-prep tutor.

In their interviews, both Amina and Sidney explained how financial barriers limited their college choices. Amina described that she was rejected by financial aid because other relatives had money she did not have access to. Sidney explained that her family’s finances were a barrier, since each college charges an application fee. She said:

I guess the main barrier would be just the fact that like, I couldn't apply places because I couldn't pay the application fee…So, that was another big thing. That's why I researched all my colleges and applied at only one place and, and that was the place I was dead set on getting into.

If Sidney would have received a Pell Grant, the government aid covers roughly $6,495 annual or 25% of full college tuition at most universities (College Foundation). However, despite growing up in poverty, students in this study had extreme difficulty receiving Pell Grant funds. Amina explained that based on factors outside of her control, she did not receive financial aid. She described her financial position as a “weird, um, limbo between that I wasn't poor enough and I wasn't rich enough for the, a lot of scholarships. It didn't accept me because they were like, you have two to three rare donors in your family, but I couldn't explain that they weren't connected to me.”
Like Amina, Jordan struggled to fill out the FAFSA, and it was particularly difficult to gather important financial documents to qualify for the Pell Grant. Jordan explained:

I didn't really understand the FAFSA process, and I'm not gonna pretend like I understand the whole thing now, but I didn't understand the fact that when the expected family contribution thing came up, that you could take that out loans. So for some reason, I think I filled it out wrong and they essentially thought my mom made like way more money than she actually did. I ended up becoming independent from her eventually. So now I do, I am independent on my FAFSA and it's based on my income. So I think that was the biggest thing for me was I just figured even as a freshman, I figured I couldn't afford it.

What Jordan described is his choice to emancipate from his parents and file the FAFSA as an independent, which disconnected him from his parents’ earnings when claiming income. Sidney echoed other participants’ issues applying for the FAFSA, which can be attributed to her lack of cultural capital. She said:

[T]he Pell grant and the other grants were very hard to apply for. My mom had no idea how to do them. My dad had no idea how to do them. Um, and man, it was a process like it was hard. Um, it took days, weeks to do and I look back I'm like, oh wow. Like there was definitely resources, but we just had no idea how to do it.

Sidney’s response confirms that students living in poverty with parents who did not attend college are at a greater disadvantage when trying to utilize government tuition resources like the FAFSA. Participants’ responses echo the level of difficulty in providing accurate documentation for federal tuition funding, as well as an overwhelming shared concern over a lack of understanding when it came to applying for aid.

**Affording Community College**

As this study emphasizes, the cost of college can be crippling on an American family’s finances. Many marginalized students find multiple means to finance their higher education and books, such as doing a semester’s worth of homework in a week to stay within a publisher’s free
trial, or working full-time to pay tuition. Eduardo, Jordan, Daniel, Amina, and Haley all explained they did not apply for scholarships to attend college—whether this was related to GPA requirements, test scores, or their family’s finances. In community college, Amina still struggled with affording college, particularly the textbooks.

So for the text, it was just super hard for me to just give up like a hundred dollars for an access code. And I didn’t realize that I would have to do it before enrolling in a class. So just yesterday, for my biology class, I started a grace period for the access code and I did all my homework in one week in that grace period. So now I don’t have to spend money on that access code.

Amina also described the way she worked to cut spending and “be extra vigilant on how to save money by using used textbooks or buying secondhand supplies and always actively looking for jobs that pay more than minimum wage.”

In her first experience as an undergraduate student at a private university studying culinary arts, Sidney explained she received two grants “specifically for low-income households.” To afford college in her second attempt at a degree, Sidney relied on grants, loans, and her husband’s income. She was hopeful that once she earned a college degree she would “be able to pay that [the loans] off pretty quickly.”

As an international student at Midhills, Eduardo worked full-time to afford community college tuition. He explained,

I’m paying for myself, the college, my family doesn’t help me with the college because they’re okay—they’re in different country. So they have a different currency. The currency here is nothing, so they cannot help me. So that’s why I’m working. I work full time to pay my college and other expenses.

Although Jordan received a Pell Grant as an independent, he still took out loans to finance community college. In his interview, Jordan explained how he still struggled with home insecurity:
Some nights I do have to sleep in a car and then I have to come here [girlfriend’s house] and shower and go to go to school, you know? That’s how I pay for it, but it’s like that comes at the cost and I’m still taking out loans.

Jordan explained that the challenges of pursuing a college degree and constantly having to prove himself, coupled with trying to cope with poverty, became overwhelming.

It’s like you’re fighting two battles at once. You’re fighting all the struggles of poverty and then you’re also trying to like prove to like some random institution that you’re smart. It’s a really silly thing, you know?

Jordan is reflecting on the rigor of the community college honors program, where he is trying to “prove” he is “smart.” This response to pursuing a degree mirrors his previous responses from his secondary and primary school teachers who thought he wasn’t trying hard enough. In community college, Jordan felt he was “fighting two battles” to combat his financial and academic struggles. Amina also used language to describe the battles she faced when trying to afford college by saying she needed to stay “vigilant” to save money on textbooks. Both Amina and Jordan described their actions with words that evoke soldiers fighting. Using this frame, it is important to return to Daniel’s description of “going into the unknown,” which also evokes a sense of invading—or entering uncharted territory. These unique descriptions help illustrate the ways marginalized students view challenges related to their own schooling.

While Haley does not describe paying for college as a battlefield, she explained that temporary government funds distributed at the beginning of the pandemic led to her ease of paying tuition. Haley was able to afford college because of the COVID Relief programming called HEERF funds. She explained:

So there was HEERF my first semester going in 2021, but I did have to pay for it [tuition] upfront. I only took two classes and then it got reimbursed to me. Same thing happened to the summer school. It got reimbursed to me my first full-time semester wasn't until spring of 2022. So that was something like, oh man. You know, I wasn't ready to take full load
classes until spring of 2022, but looking at the price tag of it ended up being waved off up to I think it was like $1,500. Um, and then they supplied book money.

After HEERF funds were no longer being distributed, Haley planned to pay for college herself. Like Eduardo, Haley struggled with juggling work and school schedules.

Amina worked part-time to pay for college, and her parents also helped pay tuition. Daniel received financial aid loans to pay his community college tuition, but he mentioned he was on his way to receiving scholarships to finance his education. The data further show that the marginalized students in this study did not receive honors program merit-based scholarships, so they made personal sacrifices to pay their own tuition.

For students with high GPAs and a strong application essay, Midhills offers three honors scholarships: full tuition up to 64 credits, $2,500 per year, and $1,000 per year. As mentioned in Chapter One, data from the honors program at Midhills Community College illustrate dynamic differences between economically marginalized first-time honors students and those who do not qualify for Pell Grant funding. Between the Fall 2016 semester to Summer 2021, over 59% of community college first-time honors students received merit-based scholarships and no Pell funds, while 12.6% of merit-based scholars received Pell funds. See Tables 3 and 4 for quantity and percentage data by scholarship and no scholarship.
### Table 3: 2016 Fall -2021 Summer New Students (as of 10/4/21)

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<tr>
<th>Honors Student Term Type</th>
<th>No Pell Awarded in Term</th>
<th>Pell Awarded in Term</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Scholars Award in Term, but in Honors Section or Honors Contract</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes Scholars Award (197 did not take Honor Sections or Contracts in that term)</td>
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<td>691</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>771</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>964</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4: Percentages 2016 Fall -2021 Summer New Students (as of 10/4/21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Honors Student Term Type</th>
<th>No Pell Awarded in Term</th>
<th>Pell Awarded in Term</th>
<th>Grand Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Scholars Award in Term, but in Honors Section or Honors Contract</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>28.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes Scholars Award (197 did not take Honor Sections or Contracts in that term)</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>80.0%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Data provided by Midhills Community College Research and Analytics, 2021]

An opportunity gap is perpetuated through the honors scholarship program when there is a nearly 50% gap between economically disadvantaged students and those who are financially stable. In this study, only Jordan received Pell Grant funding; Sidney did qualify for Pell funds during her first college attempt. Jordan had to emancipate himself from his parents, claim
independence, and struggle with home and food insecurity in order to qualify for Pell Grant funding.

In the entire Midhills honors program, only 7.5% of first-semester honors students received Pell funds and no scholarship money; Jordan falls into this data set. Most of the study participants fall in the following data set: only 20% of the honors students enrolled with neither Pell funds nor a merit-scholarship (all data from Midhills R&A, Oct. 2021). What the data show is that privileged groups who are not economically disadvantaged are receiving scholarships almost two out of three times more often than marginalized students. Again, no participants in this study received scholarship funds from the Midhills honors program.

**Breaking through Barriers**

While marginalized students faced several barriers to get to college, data indicates that enrolling in the honors courses in community college helped them break through barriers. The first research question asks: How do socially-marginalized students entering honors courses in community college for the first time experience barriers and break through barriers, if any? In the first section of this chapter, we see many ways marginalized students experience barriers like lacking financial resources for college preparation and applications, lacking cultural capital and resources to complete important financial aid applications, and barriers to self-esteem as a result of teachers’ negative comments. The second part of the question asks how students “break through barriers, if any,” which leaves the researcher and participants an opportunity to explore ways students experience break-throughs when taking community college honors courses. This section addresses themes such as less requirements to enter honors, college success resources to
help navigate financial aid and scholarship applications, increased self-confidence that emerged from participation in honors, and ways students perceive scholarships as a form of breaking through financial barriers.

**Easier Access Than High School**

This subtheme reveals how honors courses in community college are easier to access than those in high school. Data show that enrolling in honors courses in community college is easier than enrolling in high school honors courses. While the requirements to get into high school honors can range from a high GPA, high placement test scores, teacher recommendations, and even parent recommendations, community college students describe how easy it was to enroll in an honors course at Midhills. High school honors enrollment can start as early as middle school when students take placement exams. Data in this study show students are aware that their performance on middle school placement exams will determine the level of difficult, or higher tracked placement, in high school. For example, when asked about his high school classes and the way they were chosen for him, Jordan explained that he purposefully did poorly on placement exams. He said the cause of his test results stemmed from the way his family did not value school:

> When I was in middle school and we were taking the pretests to determine our tracking placements and everything, I purposefully bombed most of the pretests because I kind of saw through the system and I wanted to drift through it. I didn't really value school, um, coming from the background that I came from knowing in my family, you know, my mom did, you know, my parents did, but my brothers didn't. So, uh, for me it was just trying to cruise through the system.

Jordan is explaining how as early as middle school, he was aware that placement tests determined the courses he would take in high school. Jordan’s way of describing how he did poorly on the
placement tests is by explaining he purposely did poorly on the exams. Likewise, Haley described how the eighth grade placement tests were the turning point in her education, a time when she had to take summer school courses in order to test out of low-track courses in high school. Haley said:

Academically I did not go in testing very strong. In that eighth grade, you have to take this test. It's really serious. So, my incoming freshman year, I was in summer school to test out of some of the extremely low classes that they had put me in. Then it felt like educationally my freshman year I was behind. I knew I was just better than what I had kind of put myself up to, and part of me was okay with that until I got to sophomore year. And then I was like, no, I actually do wanna move up to the advanced classes where all of my friends are <laugh>, uh, except for my science class.

Like Jordan, Haley recognized the importance of the placement test in middle school. She also described feeling like she was behind others by the time she was a freshman because of the lower track placement. Her response also illustrates how she knew she could and should be in higher level classes. This becomes more apparent when her friends are in higher tracks—the middle track labeled “advanced”—without her.

Because students in the study are aware of the way middle school placement tests determine high school tracks, they are surprised when talking about how easy it is to get into honors courses at Midhills. Instead of taking an exam almost a year before enrolling in honors courses—like students do in middle school to prepare for high school—community college honors students have easier access to honors courses. To take honors courses at Midhills, students need a 3.2 GPA in eight-college credits, which is less than three courses (Honors, 2022). In this study, five of the six participants spent time taking college-level courses and working toward a higher GPA in order to get into honors. With a D average in high school, Jordan explained: “I had to do basically two semesters before I could fit the GPA criteria cause I did so bad in high school.”
Students in the study mentioned that once they met the GPA requirement for honors, the registration process had fewer barriers. Amina, who met the GPA requirement when entering community college, recognized the way community college honors courses are not part of a track of classes like they are in high school.

In Midhills, when I enrolled, I saw that there was a list of honor courses and they didn't have like any prereqs or advisors, and especially again as an introvert, even if I did have a good relationship with my advisor, I wouldn't have reached out to them for a letter of recommendation. So that really helped me gather up the courage to try it.

Amina is explaining that the reason she did not take honors courses in high school was because she was intimidated by the process and did not feel comfortable asking her advisor for a recommendation to get into honors. At Midhills, fewer barriers help Amina enroll. In the frame of breaking through barriers, we can see how a student who initially wanted to take honors in high school—and who qualified—was discouraged because of a barrier like asking an advisor for a letter of recommendation.

While the participants described the way high school teachers labeled and discouraged them from high track placement, the participants described ways community college professors encouraged honors enrollment. Sidney explained how professors teaching non-honors courses influenced her to enroll in honors. Sidney’s philosophy professor told her “Your work is honors,” which encouraged her. Returning to the way her secondary education teachers told her she didn’t belong in college, one can see how this professor’s encouraging words helped Sidney break through barriers caused by negative comments from teachers in primary and secondary school.

Other participants explained that an email from the Honors Director showed how easy it was to enroll in honors. Eduardo said:

I received the email that my GPA was for being an honors program and I was like, okay, I don't know what this is, but I want to learn about it. And I read that it's a really good
opportunity for me to transfer. So I get seven credits in honor class. I have more opportunity if I get 15 credits is really good for my transcript. So the part of that is that for my schedule because my schedule is so complicated. I didn't find a lot of classes to work with my schedule. Cause you have one schedule for the class. This time one class, that was the only, that was working with my schedule.

Eduardo’s response demonstrates that while getting into the honors program at Midhills has few barriers, barriers still exist in both the college-credit GPA requirement and course scheduling around employment responsibilities. Because Eduardo did not receive a scholarship or family help, he had to schedule his classes around his full-time job. Amina also works to help pay tuition. Their out-of-school commitments become barriers when work schedules interfere with their ability to participate in extracurricular opportunities in the honors program, which is covered in the next section focused on the second research question.

Newfound Confidence from Honors Enrollment

This section reveals how enrolling in honors courses for the first time in community college greatly improves a student’s self-confidence. Since high school low and middle-track placement can lead students to feel inferior to their peers in high-track courses—like Sidney, Amina, and Jordan mentioned in this section of the Findings—once enrolled in honors, the participants explained how their identity changed.

While participants once described the lack of family involvement in school as a barrier to their success, once in honors courses all of the participants described a newfound confidence. Haley who previously mentioned the lack of cultural capital as a reason her family did not place emphasis on college enrollment, later explained the joy she felt at a family party when telling others she was enrolled in honors:
I'm like so smart. <laugh> That's so fun. Um, yes. I felt smart saying it…That was me with telling people that I was in an honors class and that I was playing softball again. Like I had great pride that this was part of my identity.

Eduardo explained the way honors enrollment improved his self-confidence:

I feel higher, like I'm doing a good job in the college—that I can be part of that society. I feel good with that. I feel, how can I say, big, I don't know. So, it is like a small form of myself that just makes me feel good.

Other participants echoed the praise their families gave them when then mentioned their new honors enrollment. Because of their honors identity, students used words like “worthy,” “happy,” and “confident” to describe themselves.

It is important to note that the data reveal just how significantly a student’s self-esteem and academic identity can improve by being accepted into an academic space where they were once rejected—or kept out. Students describe themselves as “smart” and “in a different light.” They describe their actions as “doing a good job” and “worthy of being in honors classes and being paid attention to by…teachers.” Honors enrollment helps students break through barriers by giving them confidence that “there’s nothing [they] cannot do,” like “go for a graduate degree.” These statements are significant coming from students who were marginalized by society, ostracized by their peers, and told they weren’t good enough by their teachers.

Yet, these statements are problematic given the fact that students in the study were always “worthy” enough, no matter their track placement. The fact that high-tracked courses change the way they saw themselves leans on the lies tracking tells us about a student’s ability. Students in the study internalized the labels given to low-track students in high school. And, once in honors, they suddenly saw themselves in a positive light. Here is the problem with tracking: students categorize themselves by the same sorting and ranking that is problematic and harmful. Students do not need the honors label to have value. Parents of high school honors
students do not need a bumper sticker to have value. The system sends messages to students that specific tracks are designated for specific types of students. Ultimately, students’ identities are shaped by this faulty system. So, yes, this newfound confidence is a way students broke through barriers; however, they did not need to take an honors course to gain confidence. The problematic tracking system should not have robbed them of their confidence in the first place.

**Resources to Assist Students**

This section of the Findings shows how support staff in high school and community college provide resources to bridge barriers for students unfamiliar with financial aid or the scholarship application process. Students whose parents did not attend college expressed how they felt lost when applying for college and student loans. In high school, Sidney described how she struggled to apply for financial aid because her parents “didn't really have any idea what they were doing, filling these things out.” Though they eventually completed the paperwork—and Sidney received a Pell Grant and culinary scholarship during her first college experience at an out-of-state school—Sidney explained that she feared they originally filled the forms out incorrectly.

The Pell grant and the other grants were very hard to apply for. My mom had no idea how to do them. My dad had no idea how to do them. It was a process; like it was hard. Um, it took days, weeks to do, and I look back I'm like, oh wow. Like there were definitely resources, but we just had no idea how to do it. I thought we were gonna get in trouble or whatever.

Amina had a similar situation in high school where she ran into an issue when completing financial aid forms. Amina said,
I applied obviously to a lot of scholarships and grants, but it was just that weird limbo between that I wasn't poor enough and I wasn't rich enough for a lot of scholarships. It didn't accept me because they were like, you have two to three rare donors in your family, but I couldn't explain that they weren't connected to me. So a lot of different factors were there, which the universities didn't factor in. They just thought that I would--because a lot of questions were like, does your family have this much money? And I would say, yes, they do have this much money, but I couldn't explain it in the questionnaire that they do have this much money, but it's not us. I cannot just go and have it.

Amina’s frustration with the financial aid process reflects other perspectives from socially marginalized students.

Out of all the participants, Jordan had help from high school support staff. Here, he explained how his high school counselor did the heavy lifting to help him fill out the FAFSA:

My school made it approachable, but I didn't really want to go to school that much. So my counselor had to do most of it [the FAFSA] for me. Um, kind of drag me along through the finish line, if you will.

In community college, school resources, like counselors and advisors, help students navigate college planning. Daniel found resources at Midhills to help him apply for scholarships. He described the process as being his first time applying. Based on his response, it is clear that community college support staff helps students apply for scholarships.

Well, so far, like I, this is my first scholarship season that I'm actually applying now that I have a little bit more information, because prior to this [I had] no idea how it worked or anything. So now that I'm here, I'm getting resources from stuff available. So now I'm able to actually go out and seek these scholarship opportunities.

Based on Daniel’s response, we see just how valuable community college support staff and faculty can be for students who lack cultural capital. Students who need funding the most—those who are economically disadvantaged in this study—are the same students whose parents did not attend college and therefore are unfamiliar with the process of applying for loans and scholarships.
Once enrolled in the community college honors program, Sidney said she was definitely interested in attending an honors transfer seminar where “you can get on [Zoom] with a group and they can talk about like transferring and honors scholarships and they kind of like walk you through it.” Sidney is referring to the many transfer seminars the honors program runs that unite students with potential transfer institutions. One such event was featured in the list of flyers that the students viewed while recording their digital diary prompts. Participants were asked to view the flyers and answer questions about their interest and attendance at the events. One flyer had the words “Learn More About [University Name]! Academic Scholarships are $16,000-23,000 per year.” The director of admissions and transfer enrollment from the university was presenting at Midhills in the Honors office on a Thursday from 3:30-4:30 p.m. It is important to draw attention to the way this in-person meet-and-greet with the administrator responsible for admissions and transfer students was eager to talk with Midhills honors students about scholarships. Considering the first subtheme in this section about easy access to honors programs, one might also note how the community college honors program provides “easier” access to transfer institutions.

The data in this section illustrate the various ways support staff in both high school and college, including those working in honors and financial aid, assist first-time honors students in breaking through financial barriers by providing necessary resources like FAFSA and scholarship application assistance. Based on this evidence, the data reveal how socially marginalized students locate ways to fill in resource gaps that exist as a result of a deficit in cultural capital. Returning to Tables 3 and 4, the 20-percent of honors students who did not receive a Pell Grant or honors scholarship are the most vulnerable population—represented by 5 of the 6 students in this study who also did not receive Pell funding or an honors scholarship.
The data in this section, therefore, provide a snapshot of the ways these students face barriers to college success—and the ways support staff lead to potential break throughs.

**Students’ Perceptions of Break-Throughs**

Students enrolled in community college honors courses see honors-specific transfer scholarships as a means to break through financial barriers. When considering financial barriers, it is important to emphasize that while this study does not include data on how students broke through financial barriers, the absence of data is still data. What this shows is that students who were marginalized in primary and secondary school continue to be impacted by the same factors, like lack of financial resources. As previously stated, the biggest concern the researcher has is that students whose families could not afford college did not receive scholarships for honors courses—for the same reasons they were not enrolled in honors in high school. Students who did not have high SAT scores or high GPAs did not attend four-year colleges for the same reason. Given the opportunity to take honors courses in community college, it only seems logical to help vulnerable students fund their education. Yet, these same students are stuck trying to work a full-time job to pay for college, which deters them from taking full advantage of the resources in honors—like extracurricular activities.

What is interesting in a discussion about breaking through barriers is that students who experienced poverty in primary and secondary school did not break through any financial barriers once in community college honors courses. Instead, it is the perception of opportunities that exist in the honors program that lead students to believe they will eventually benefit from honors enrollment. And perhaps this mindset has been established in the workforce. Consider students out
of college who are aware of the starting salary of a position they apply for. While that starting salary might be low and barely livable, employees see their supervisors earning more than they do, and most believe they will also have the opportunity to increase their wages. There is no guarantee that an entry-level worker will ever make a supervisor’s wage, yet it is the perception of the higher wage that encourages workers to apply. The same situation was presented in this study when students were asked about their perceptions of the benefits of honors enrollment. While the second section of this chapter covers opportunities in honors, it is important to look at the way students perceive honors scholarships as a means to break through financial barriers. Again, like the starting wage analogy, there is no guarantee that community college honors students will receive a scholarship from a transfer institution, but rather the belief that enrollment in honors courses will provide an opportunity to break through financial barriers.

In a digital diary recording, Haley explained why in high school she gave up her plans of going to college.

By the time I was a sophomore, I knew I wasn't going to college. By the time I was a junior, I got my SAT scores back and I definitely knew I wasn't going to college. And the reasons being was a hundred percent due to money. And just my ability and the doubt that I had in myself. Now as a college student, I'm a lot more grown. I'm 22 now. And I did take time out of high school to get back into it. So I think that development, that real world skill was able to give me the passion and drive. And as well as the notion for necessity: college was a necessity. Especially when you look at statistics between people who do and don't go, financially it's choice. But now also, I know it's the only way that I could truly pursue the career dream that I have.

In Haley’s response, she suggested that her SAT scores prevented her from receiving scholarship money. At 22, the honors program at Midhills helped Haley break through barriers and finally qualify for scholarships. She said,

I have earned my GPA and I have earned my spot in the honor society. It's just that's part of like the honor society's purpose is “oh, we're gonna help you find scholarships.” So I think that taking the honors class really like set me forward into my goal. And I say this
all the time, I'm not paying for my four years... I'm not paying for that process to go to another school like that. My transfer school. I don't wanna pay for it. Right. I want somebody else to pay for it and I wanna take money and put it into a tiny house so I could go wherever that school is and I don't have to pay for room and board.

Haley’s response demonstrates how she was aware of the high cost of housing. To combat this, she planned to live in minimalist housing and finance the rest of her undergraduate degree through honors scholarships.

Like Daniel and Jordan, Amina leaned on school support staff for advising and future planning. She said,

There's a whole honors office with faculty who are extremely helpful in deciding the future, and advising on which other classes to take, for honors students specifically… These opportunities along with specific scholarships solely for honor students help me decide my future path and transfer plans for college. A lot of universities provide full-ride scholarships for two years just to honor students, which motivates me to take more honors classes and apply to those certain universities and scholarships.

Similar to the way Amina’s decision to attend Midhills Community College was determined by her family’s finances, her future plans were dictated by the affordability of her college degree. Note how she is not set on any particular college or university. Instead, she is interested in the schools who provide full-ride scholarships for honors students.

Sidney, whose husband is helping her pay tuition along with loans, described how she sees her honors courses as means to secure connections with transfer schools:

I've gotten so many emails about scholarships that I can apply to. We got the access to PTK, that you can go apply to. And then within that foundation, there's so many schools that just work with them. And so it makes getting in the door to some colleges way easier.

Eduardo, who is working full-time to pay community college tuition, also described how participation in honors secures connections with other transfer institutions, though his proposed transfer university is not included:
I know that the honors program have like scholarships, have deals with another college for transfer where they have a scholarship for one-hundred percent of the tuition or things like that. So I think it's a good opportunity. In my case, I don't apply for that because where I want to transfer, it's not like too much.

Jordan, the only current Pell Grant recipient in this study, was straight-forward with his reason for taking honors courses, which includes scholarships. He said, “I wanted to set myself apart from other people to put it bluntly in terms of workforce, in the workforce, applying to colleges, I know that I could get more scholarships if I have honors.”

Daniel explained how his professors wrote letters of recommendation for their students as a requirement for scholarship applications. As in high school, in order to successfully transfer, Daniel needed professors to “recommend” him. In other words, the teacher recommendations that exist as barriers to high school honors return when students leave and attempt to finance their university transfer.

In community college honors courses, Jordan came to appreciate education. Here Jordan specifically uses the word “value” again when explaining how banking and rote memorization in high school contributed to the way he became a curious learner in college:

My love for knowledge was something that I immediately grasp onto that I already kind of had in high school, but I was kind of rooted in that anti-intellectual I was telling you about, you know, valuing baseless facts and information that's unconnected. Whereas school [Midhills] allowed me to transform my interest and curiosity and internal questioning that I'd always had that I just come to weird, idealistic conclusions and allow it to root it in a material analysis of the world, right? So, intellectually that's the one way, things have obviously changed for me in many other ways. But as a student, I also started playing the game, if you wanna put it that way, as a negative side to this.

To see how Jordan broke through barriers in a system he did not value and ultimately come to value education—one can see how Jordan changed for the better. In this way the term “break through barriers” is more metaphorical, since the barrier—his opinion of and motivation
toward education—improved. Is an improvement considered “breaking through”? Certainly the researcher saw this as a break-through of sorts, particularly given the way Jordan perceives the role of education in his future employment endeavors. In his final digital diary recording, Jordan said,

I'm hoping the honors program will allow me to pursue more intellectual career path, you know, of research or, being a professor, a teacher or whatever, uh, while having that subsistence part covered. Cuz I just don't wanna struggle. I know things get complicated no matter how much money you're making, but I wanna be able to, to have enough gas to get to work for school or wherever I'm heading. So that's, that's, that's the big thing I think of, you know, uh, when I think of the benefits, how to impact my future.

This chapter section traces ways Jordan was initially rejected by the education system and mistreated by his teachers. He graduated with a D average. Yet, in community college, when challenged in the classroom, Jordan becomes inspired to pursue a “more intellectual career path.” The breakthrough in his particular case is the way community college honors courses help students find their paths to success. Other students in the study see the honors program as a path to finance their future at a transfer institution. There is strong evidence to suggest students gained self-confidence as a result of enrolling in community college honors courses. This newfound confidence can be viewed as breaking through barriers since primary and secondary school teachers labeled students in this study—and often called them names that reduced their self-perceptions.

Opportunities in Honors

The second research question locates the opportunities socially marginalized students gain in community college honors courses. Data in this section show all participants in the study note a higher level of engagement and dialogue in their honors courses. Participants also identify
the future benefits of participating in community college honors courses, including transfer scholarships, transcript distinction, and career connections. This section of the chapter provides students’ perspectives about how they view the role of honors courses as opportunities.

**Enhanced Learning Environment**

Students taking honors courses for the first time recognize opportunities provided by their professors in an enhanced learning environment. This section isolates data on the ways students view honors faculty and the architecture of honors courses as opportunities for learning and future success.

**Honors Faculty**

Students describe ways honors faculty are supportive of their academic growth and independent research. Participants in this study overwhelmingly reflect research trends about honors faculty accessibility and expertise (Kisker & Outcalt, 2005), plus this study adds more insight about professors’ behaviors. At Midhills Community College, the majority of the honors faculty are full-time professors. This is significant at an institution with a majority of adjunct professors. In other words, the majority of the courses at Midhills are taught by part-time staff, while the majority of the honors faculty are full-time professors. Haley explained that her professor was understanding and lenient when she suffered a tragedy at the beginning of the semester. Haley says,

>[M]y professor was so understanding of the grief of my father passing away in January. That was really hard. Um, still is, but I'm sure she's seen me throughout the semester. Like trying to know [course material] when there were some rough patches…[S]he was
very understanding, very lenient with her due dates. She was very simple with what was due…It was a weekly reflection every week it was participate in class and these big projects and the big projects is where the majority of our points came from.

Haley’s response illustrates the flexibility and agency full-time honors faculty have with their curricula. The researcher, who has experience working as an adjunct faculty instructor at Midhills, recalls being given a syllabus and required textbook to teach composition courses. As an adjunct member, faculty have less opportunities to be lenient and flexible, particularly if they are working between several community colleges. Yet, adjunct faculty make up almost 90% of the professors and instructors at Midhills.

Participants describe their professors as “extremely helpful,” “welcoming,” “accepting,” and promoting “self-love.” Many participants in the study reflected on ways honors professors are accessible and available during their office hours. Jordan described the difference between adjunct faculty in non-honors courses and full-time honors faculty. He said,

You can go visit an honors professor in their office hours or you know, I get like much better feedback I've noticed too, as well from like my papers and things like that…And having an available professor to be able to help me develop these ideas and judge them from my own point of view and not from their point of view. Yeah, I think that's the main thing for me.

Returning to a previous point, Jordan’s response illustrates the impact the faculty member’s physical space on campus impacts his learning opportunities.

Amina explained how honors professors are accessible and encourage independent research. She said, “A lot of professors help you in your research. A lot of professors and instructors provide you with extra help in choosing your research topics or advising you what to do next.” She also noted the additional support staff and resources available to honors students:

There's a whole honors office with faculty who are extremely helpful in deciding the future and advising on which other classes to take. For honors students specifically…I think I benefit from all of these immensely.
The honors office is a new addition to Midhills Community College, and it consists of a common area, two desks for support staff and the Honors Director, and two conference rooms. During the day, students can walk into the Honors Office and ask questions of the support staff and Honors Director. The physical space makes the program accessible to students. In fact, Sidney described the way she signed up for honors courses once she had a 3.9 GPA in college, which included visiting the Honors Office. She said,

"I did go to the honors office, but I haven't really gotten any of their information for them. Um, like essentially I just, when I was signing up for my classes, I was like, "Hey, can I, I do honors?" And they said, "Yeah, sure."

Haley also stopped by the Honors Office, and during her visit she was given a goody bag. She explained what she found in the treat bag and also mentioned emails sent by the Honors Director to promote upcoming events:

"The first day there was a goody bag. There was a PTK flyer in there. There were sticky notes, a multicolored pen, a bookmark. I'm like, "oh, this is what the school budgets for. Okay. Okay." Then I also just look at the emails.

Haley enjoyed the treats inside the bag from the Honors Office, but at the same time she questioned the amount of money spent on pens, bookmarks, and sticky notes from the school’s budget. Overall, data in this section illustrate how students view honors faculty as accessible and supportive, along with the honors office as a physical space they can visit to have their questions answered.

More In-Depth Knowledge of Course Content

Students view classroom discussions as enhanced learning opportunities and pathways to more in-depth knowledge of course content. Beyond the way honors faculty support students and
provide opportunities for learning growth, students in the study noted how honors course content was more dialogue-based than non-honors courses. Much of what participants described in this section about in-depth knowledge of classroom content aligns with the Freirean dialogic inquiry practice, where students make meaning through dialoguing with others (Taines, 2011). Daniel explained that non-honors courses are more explanatory, where professors describe steps in processes versus honors courses where professors say, “here's the equation, this is how it is and you're able to, like, you have to put the pieces together by yourself, kind of.” Both Daniel and Eduardo noticed how students in non-honors are less engaged, while students in honors, as Daniel put it, “are actually interested in the material trying to learn the material and their participation is higher.”

Participants note the design of the classroom which contributed to in-depth discussions. Jordan acknowledged the physical change in his honors classroom. He said, “We'll do a thing where like we physically turn the desks into a circle and like it's a circle group discussion.”

Echoing Jordan’s response, Amina recognized the way the design of the honors classroom enhances the discussion. She said,

And even like, you talk about the classroom setting, it's so interesting to me that like, usually our [non-honors] classes are in groups are like straight chairs, but I've seen almost all of my honor classes: it's like open chairs everyone's in like facing each other and there's like a circular, um, setting. And it's just so interesting to see how that kinda contributes.

Some honors courses are held in large computer lab classrooms, with computers on the outer perimeter of the room and three long tables in the center. Given the design of the wheeled computer chairs, students can turn and face other students with ease. They can roll their chairs to the center tables if they are physically capable. Like the honors faculty offices and Honors
Office, the physical setting of the honors classroom is identified by students as an opportunity, and they noticed enhanced dialogue was a direct result of the way students’ chairs form a circle.

Sidney further explained the different level of engagement in an honors classroom discussion by describing a recent scene in her honors Philosophy class:

If we're talking about like Plato or Socrates or like a text or something, rather than [in non-honors], you know, the teacher kind of like leading and then asking really direct questions and then not letting you like, expand on those. Like, [in honors] we end up spending a lot more time digging deeper into the content and being able to synthesize the content more intensely. Whereas like the regular classes, it's like you get like a very broad overview and it's cool if you ask some detailed questions, but we're not gonna go like in depth and, and people aren't interested in going in depth.

Jordan described the differences between his high school low and middle track courses where teachers practice the “banking” method and his community college honors courses which challenge him with meaning-making activities. Jordan said,

The format [in honors] was, you know, read a historical text or a novel or whatever and try to boil down the main arguments: what are they arguing, you know, which like sounds simple, but is super complicated when you try to do it as an undergrad or, you know, for anything really. So having that push, I was like able to now see the value in studying things, because whereas in high school, I was like, here's a date. I had this teacher, he was so funny. He would say “spoonfeed, spoonfeed.” And that was his signal to write down what was gonna be on the test. Like that sort of, that sort of function of like, you're here to, to just write this down versus like, analyze this text.

Like Daniel’s comment about honors courses challenging students to “put the pieces together” by themselves, Jordan was aware of the difference between banking and dialogic inquiry. Daniel, Jordan, and Sidney noticed the way honors professors pushed students to make meaning out of classroom topics. Sidney’s comment about “digging deeper into the content and being able to synthesize…more intensely” mirrors both Daniel’s and Jordan’s comments about analyzing content.
This section of the Findings looks at ways students view the variety of scholarships for community college honors students as a means to reduce and/or eliminate future tuition costs. While the first section of this chapter revealed that no participants in the study received a scholarship to attend Midhills, including any honors scholarships, participants note that one reason to take honors is for the transfer scholarship opportunities. Similar to the “breaking through barriers” section of this chapter, students suggested one of the main benefits of taking honors courses at community college was the access to scholarships.

All participants discussed the various ways enrollment in community college honors courses will lead to scholarships. Describing opportunities through PTK and transfer institutions the data can be summed up by saying marginalized students taking honors courses for the first time see their enrollment as a means to finance their future academics.

Like four other participants, Haley places emphasis on how she has earned her way in the honors society, which will help her find scholarships. She said,

I have earned my GPA and I have earned my spot in the honor society. It's just that's part of like the honor society's purpose is, “oh, we're gonna help you find scholarships.” So I think that taking the honors class really set me forward into my goal. And I say this all the time, I'm not paying for my four years. Like I'm not paying for that process to go to another school like that—my transfer school. I don't wanna pay for it. Right. I want somebody else to pay for it and I wanna take money and put it into a tiny house so I could go wherever that school is and I don't have to pay for room and board. Yeah. Like I know it's so expensive. It's so expensive.

Haley’s comments echo the introduction of this dissertation and the emphasis on the high cost of college. Recall that none of the participants in the study received scholarships for college tuition, and all students view their honors enrollment as a bridge to scholarships at their transfer
institutions. Returning to a point made when analyzing data from the first research question, students in the study perceive honors enrollment as a means to break through financial barriers.

**Extracurricular Activities**

While students view extracurricular activities in honors as opportunities to gain knowledge and connections, the activities are out of reach because of barriers. Participants in the study were asked about their participation in extracurricular activities through the honors program several times: during the interview, during the digital diary prompts, and after viewing images of flyers advertising honors events. The images of flyers in the second digital diary prompt included the following activities: a private art discussion and tour with a popular visual artist, a brochure on transfer scholarships, and Honors Student Advisory Committee Meeting flyer, two transfer scholarship applications, a transfer scholarship flyer for a private local university, a flyer for the Honors Contract, a popcorn fundraiser, and a Celebration of Student Excellence brochure. Additional external documents in the digital diary prompts include the Midhills Honors Scholarship webpage, and the Honors Council of the Illinois Region flyer. The following includes various ways students in the study engage with honors activities—and locate opportunities within these activities. This section of Chapter Four also includes reasons why students do not participate in honors activities.

**Types of Activities**

Students view art center visits and transfer seminars as opportunities for advanced knowledge and increased peer-to-peer interactions. Amina described her experiences at three
different honors events—a seminar, a webinar on scholarships, and a private art gallery tour—as follows:

I did attend a seminar and that was so interesting because I'm taking Honors Psych this semester. So that was kind of related to that. And it opened a lot of opportunities. There were people that were coming from all backgrounds, we could network along with each other. They were opening up job opportunities right there on the panel. So it was just a really open and exciting opportunity…I did attend a webinar on honors scholarships and where to apply. I also went to exhibit tours by [artist’s name]. It was very educational and certainly a very new thing for me. I had this great experience there. There were a lot of other honors students that I could connect with, and I had a great time seeing the exhibition and meeting new people. (digital diary)

Amina drew attention to the way her attendance at an honors seminar for her psychology class led to “opening up job opportunities.” Her emphasis on networking and the “exciting opportunity” demonstrate how Amina viewed the honors activity as a means to employment prospects. While she did not go into specific details during the digital diary recording about how “job opportunities” were presented to her at the honors panel, the response confirms how Amina connects her attendance to future advancement.

Eduardo explained that extracurricular activities are some of the opportunities offered in the honors program. When asked about opportunities in the program, Eduardo said,

I think extracurricular activities. Like for example, the last semester I was an NSO [New Student Orientation] leader, so I think that this is a really good extra extracurricular activity that helped me... And also I'm part of the student organization CAP, Chapter Activity Board. So I think that's like different opportunities that I think that all this will help me also for my college plans and also for my, in the future as a student, as a worker, as a person. So, and I hope, uh, with the rest [of the semesters] that attend…in the college. Just take more extracurricular activities.

Like Amina, Eduardo did not explain how his participation in the various clubs and activities will contribute to his future; however, he does make the connection—like Amina—between participation in extracurricular events and future gain.
Reasons Students Did Not Participate

This section shows that although there are many extracurricular opportunities in honors, it is hard for marginalized students to participate due to work schedule demands and transportation costs. Because she was new to the honors program at the time of the study, Sidney did not have a chance to participate in the honors events. After looking at the flyers in the digital diary prompt, she explained why she had not participated and also expresses interest in future events—particularly the transfer webinar:

So, looking at the flyers, I've only been in honors classes for two months now. I have not gone to any of the events, simply because they have not happened yet or there hasn't been many. And also like whatever there has been, I just, I've been, busy with kind of like some other stuff that's been going on...So I have not gone to those yet, but I will be attending. I don't know which flyer it's on, but it's just like the one where you can get on like with a group and they can talk about like transferring and honors scholarships and they kind of like walk you through it. I'm definitely gonna be doing at least one of those, if not a few others.

Jordan explained that his lack of spending money contributed to reasons why he did not participate:

I actually had a course with the head of the honors program here at Midhills. I think I've received physically all of these flyers in two separate courses, now that I'm thinking about two separate honors courses. So, yeah, like, I mean, these things are offered, but it's just, it feels more complicated than like, “oh, I'll go to this popcorn fundraiser,” you know, because...I wanted to do it, but I didn't have gas money, you know? Um, and it, it's much more difficult this semester too because all of these things that are outside of school I want to go to, but I can't.

Regarding the flyer about the Honors Council of the Illinois Region Symposium—an annual symposium where honors students from community colleges and universities share their research—Jordan explained that the lack of financial resources and self-confidence keep him from participating. Jordan previously described his lack of confidence as a result of the way
teachers labeled him in primary and secondary school. Being home insecure as a child and again in community college remains a hindrance in the way Jordan can participate in extracurricular activities. Without resources to participate, Jordan feels “outside of this whole thing,” one who is clearly living out the impact of marginalization.

Almost the same age as Jordan, at 22-years-old, Haley explained a disconnect she felt from the honors program because of her responsibilities as a student athlete:

I did not participate in any of the honors events just because I had a really busy schedule as a student athlete. And that was really my biggest excuse was just not that it wasn't interesting. I think there was a little bit of exclusivity in it that I wasn't sure I needed to attend because I was with my softball team and focusing on my sport.

At 30-years-old, Daniel did not participate in honors events. When asked if he participates, he offered a one-line response: “Um, for honors No, I have not.” When asked a follow up question about the reason behind why he did not participate, he elaborated:

Like, I mean, I'm not sure what, what's going on to be honest. Okay. I'm like, sometimes if I come here early, like today I was, I came early to do my lab. I walk by here [the researcher’s office] and I said, “Hey, that number looks familiar,” <laugh>. And then I'm like, “Oh, that's where her office is. So I stop by.” So yeah, sometimes if I see something I'll, I'll kind of just poke my head and see what's going on.

After the interview, Daniel was unable to complete the digital diary prompts. The prompts would have encouraged Daniel to view the various honors events and further elaborate on his interest and participation. Based on information offered during the interview, it is the researcher’s understanding that Daniel’s health is an obstacle to attendance. Daniel described his struggles waiting for an organ donor:

I'm disabled at this point, I'm waiting for a kidney transplant. So I'm not a, like, I was trying to work for as long as I could, but it became very, very hard. And like, my health was deteriorating, so I stopped. I had to stop working, and I found myself at home with a lot of energy and nothing really to do. So I figured hey, why not do something good and go back to school?
Based on the data, it is clear that the participants face many challenges when considering how they might participate in honors activities. Student athletics, employment, health, finances, and a lack of self-confidence all contribute to reasons why first-time honors students do not participate in extracurricular activities offered through the program. In the second research question about opportunities, the most significant opportunities gained in the honors program are access to transfer scholarships—or perceived paths to fund higher education.

Tracking and Identity

The final research question asks: How are first-time honors students’ identities shaped by tracking? This section of the Findings exposes the impact of low track enrollment on a student’s self-perception. This section also illuminates data on the dichotomous labels of honors and non-honors students—and how low track students see themselves and others in society. The first subsection looks at labels participants assign to students in tracked classes. The second subsection illuminates ways teachers’ behaviors impact a student’s self-perception. The third theme presents findings about the long-term effects domain-specific identity—associating certain personality traits to students in academic spaces—has on a student’s mental health. The final theme recalls the findings on breaking through barriers, where students’ self-perception improves in the community college honors cohort.
Identities Assigned by Tracking

This section of the findings shows ways students assign labels to peers based on academic track. Labels assigned to students in the hierarchical tracking structure leave a deep impact on their self-perception. Students in low-track courses are assigned labels by other students and teachers—which negatively shape their identities. In Table 5, below, participants described various labels like social class, intelligence, race, behaviors, appearance, and other notable assumptions and stereotypes borne from tracked classrooms.

Table 5 helps illustrate the dichotomous labels given to low and high-tracked students. Intelligence labels assigned to low-track students include stupid, below average, dumb, and “dumb kid classes,” while honors students were labeled as intelligent. Low-track high school students were labeled as “less affluent” and lesser when it came to social class, while their honors colleagues were considered affluent and described as having “all these resources.” Labels to describe racial backgrounds of high school students in low-track classes included minorities and people of color, while one of the participants in the study, Haley, recognized that honors classes had “only one Black person in AP Lit.” Jordan described how racialized spaces in high school lead to stereotypes. He said:

I was always like, Asian and Indian kids were like the AP honors kids. I'm not saying that this is how it actually was, the perception that I had at the time, and the perception, um, that was, I guess, the normative lens, if you wanna put it that way. Fancy academic talk….When you see a classroom and it's still mostly white people, but there's a more considerable amount of, say Asian people or black people or whatever different, uh, person of color you're discussing or observing, it always seems like there's a lot in there, even though in reality, you know, it's really not, not that many compared to white people.

Jordan later described the subconscious way students internalize racialized stereotypes:

“And then the racist stereotypes that are associated with that, like, Asian people are smarter,
better at math, all this sort of thing.” As a white student, Jordan recognized he is from the
dominant culture, but he was keenly aware of the way white students dominated honors spaces.
Despite his references of “Asian and Indian kids” as “the AP and honors kids,” Jordan explained
that the percentage of different racial groups was still low in comparison to white students in
high school honors.

Jordan’s comments reflect research on the ways students assign stereotypes to people of
various racial groups based on their track placement (Clotfelter, 2004; Ruben et al., 2006; Tyson,
2011). Haley, who is Black, noted that in her high school honors classes you “don’t see kids who
look like me,” which echoes Tyson’s (2011) research on racialized classrooms. Considering how
students see their peers within and outside of tracked classrooms—and the ways students make
meaning out of their life world (Freire, 1985)—one can ascertain how racial stereotypes, like
Jordan’s comment above, can metastasize. If students do not see certain racial groups in honors
classrooms, and schools are lauding honors students at assemblies as model examples, then racial
stereotypes gain fuel. For example, at an assembly honoring honors students, if the majority of
the students are White and Asian, using Jordan’s observation, than students from other racial
groups see that White and Asian students are better—according to the way the school celebrates
them. This also shows how marginalized students in the assembly stands feel like they are not
good enough to be celebrated at an assembly.

Participants in the study described the appearance of low-track students like themselves
as wearing a “rugged backpack,” having “raggedy clothes,” and even used descriptions like
“scummy and gross” to describe low-track students. Meanwhile, honors students in high school
were described as being “preppy” and “nerdy” with “some cool people here and there.”
Participants noted differing behaviors in high school non-honors and honors courses, as well as their community college peers. In community college, non-honors students are described as “slacking about” and those who “don’t really participate.” In contrast, community college honors students participate “freely” and “like being there.” Community college honors students are also seen as those with their “priorities in order” and are “mature” and “focused.” High school low-track students are unprepared and “hesitate to participate,” while high school honors students “needed to achieve more than” and are confident, those who “go above and beyond.” The behavior labels are similar between high school non-honors and community college non-honors students. Both higher education and secondary education students who are not enrolled in honors are described as those who do not participate. Meanwhile, both high school and college honors students are described with behaviors linked to achievement, participation, and dedication.

Table 5 is divided into four columns, from high school low-track, high school honors, community college non-honors, and community college honors students. The rows are divided into label categories, including social class, intelligence, race, behaviors, and other labels. All content originates from the interviews and digital diaries recorded in this study.
Table 5. Labels Assigned to Tracks Described by Participants in Interviews and Digital Diaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT TYPE:</th>
<th>High School Low Track Students</th>
<th>High School Honors and AP Students</th>
<th>Community College Non-Honors Students</th>
<th>Community College Honors Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LABEL CATEGORY: Social class</td>
<td>Lesser “less affluent”</td>
<td>Middle class “had all these resources”</td>
<td>“obviously pretty intelligent”</td>
<td>“There’s a lot more people of color.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>Stupid Below average Dumb “dumb kid classes”</td>
<td>intelligent</td>
<td>“slacking about” “don’t really participate” “in a group... One person is doing all the work. Three of them really don’t care” Not as invested</td>
<td>“dedicated to what they’re studying” “Everyone is participating freely and everyone likes being there” Mature Focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>People of Color Minorities “there’s a lot of Hispanic kids and, you know, they were never in honors”</td>
<td>“don’t see kids who look like me” [Black/biracial] Only one Black person in AP Lit All white White, Asian, and Indian “Like honors kids were all white or maybe there was a few, uh, African American kids like mixed in there.”</td>
<td>“needed to achieve more than” Confident Uptight “going above and beyond”</td>
<td>“more of a slacker vibe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviors</td>
<td>“rejected the school” “didn’t see value in it” Unprepared Immature “hesitant to participate” “didn’t learn like everybody else” Troublemaker Problem kids</td>
<td>“needed to achieve more than” Confident Uptight “going above and beyond”</td>
<td>“slacking about” “don’t really participate” “in a group... One person is doing all the work. Three of them really don’t care” Not as invested</td>
<td>“more of a slacker vibe”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>“rugged backpack” “raggedy clothes” “scummy and gross”</td>
<td>Preppy Nerdy “Preppiness” “some cool people here and there”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Labels</td>
<td>Troubled Crime Drugs “aren’t good enough to be recognized” “slow classes” “don’t deserve to be recognized” Delinquent “stupid classes”</td>
<td>First-Gen “Separate entity from the rest of the students” Recognized at an assembly “gonna get great jobs” “gonna go places in life” “gonna go to really good schools”</td>
<td>“more of a slacker vibe”</td>
<td>“Priorities in order “a lot more open-minded than I might have previously thought”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher intentionally left participants’ names off Table 5 in order to show a collective voice describing the way students see their “life world” in tracked classrooms. Starting with social class, the collective voice shows participants saw students in low track courses as “lesser” and “less affluent.” It is important to note that no participants described low track
students as affluent or having resources. Additionally, participants saw honors and AP students as “middle class” and “affluent,” those “having all these resources.” Again, no participants described honors students as “lesser” or “less affluent.” In this data, it is clear that honors courses are associated with affluence while non-honors courses are associated with lower social class.

Harmful stereotypes like “stupid” and “dumb” emerged when participants described low-track students’ intelligence. Alternatively, honors students were described as “intelligent.” We know from research that honors does not equate with intelligence (Gorski, 2018), yet we can see from the data how students assume intelligence when a student is in honors. In other words, parents who display bumper stickers that say they have an honors student at Such and Such high school are truly saying “my child is intelligent.” Honors is a badge for not only social class but also intellectual superiority.

Tracked classrooms cause students to craft racial stereotypes from educational spaces. For example, one participant proclaimed that “there's a lot of Hispanic kids and, you know, they were never in honors,” which is a generalization and racial stereotype formed from observations where the student did not see other Hispanic students in honors courses. Using the assembly setting, if honors assemblies do not recognize Hispanic and Latino students, what will other racial groups see? When we think of Freirean meaning-making, it is troubling to consider how these students form racial stereotypes from tracked classrooms.

Stereotypes and negative labels for non-honors students persist in college. Participants claimed that group work in non-honors community college courses present situations where one student does all the work. Other participants described non-honors students as “slacking about” and students saw non-honors peers as “not as invested” in their learning. Meanwhile, honors students’ behaviors include descriptions like “mature,” “focused,” and classroom settings where
“everyone is participating freely” as opposed to one person carrying the weight in non-honors.

The data show that tracking causes negative labels for non-honors students—even in college.

Most significant is the data in the Other Labels column where participants described low-track high school students as criminals. Participants used descriptors like “troubled,” “crime,” and “drugs” to explain low-track students, while honors students were described as a “separate entity from the rest of the students.” This description, the “separate entity” invites an illustration of a coveted, protected group of students who are sheltered from the “troubled” “crime” population. This hierarchical structure—the intelligent, affluent honors students separated from the less-affluent, “stupid” low-track students—is a devastating depiction of how students make meaning out of their “life-world.” Students spend four years in high school exposed to this harmful structure and the way they form meaning about themselves and others is saturated in this bogus narrative.

**Ways Teachers’ Behaviors Impact Student Identity**

In this section, low-track students describe how their identity is negatively impacted by teachers’ behaviors toward low and high track students. Students in low-track classes internalize the hierarchical labeling in high schools and form identities around assigned labels. Sidney described the way her high school praised honors and AP students with assemblies and loudspeaker announcements. Sidney said:

[E]very assembly or announcements in the morning would always make announcements listing all of the students who made it into the Honors society, or they would be recognized for whatever academic achievements there were…[T]he teachers when giving speeches, they would like really praise these students. Like “they're going above and beyond.” “They're gonna go places in life.” “They're gonna get really good jobs.”
“They're gonna have scholarships.” “They're gonna go to really good schools and they're gonna be really successful.”

Sidney explained the impact this high-track praise had on her and her lower-track peer group:

[T]here's like this underlying tone, at least for me and at least for a few other people that I know, it was like, “Oh, well yeah, they're gonna do good.” But uh, you know, they're lowkey kind of like referring to the regular and the lower-level kids. Like, “You guys aren't good enough.” “You guys aren't good enough to be recognized.” “You guys don't deserve to be recognized. And honestly, we're not really gonna pour any of our money into these regular classes because it's not worth it because you guys don't care because you guys aren't gonna be smart anyway. So like, we're gonna pour our money only into the quote better or advanced courses.”

From this participant’s response, it is clear that students internalize their place in the world by the way their high school sorts and ranks students. By placing emphasis on just how great the honors students are, students who are not included in the high-track group internalize the messaging and come to understand that they are not valued by the school. Honors students are recognized at assemblies in front of non-honors students. The praise the honors students receive emphasizes the labels teachers assigned to honors students. Teachers said honors students “are going above and beyond,” which confirms the assumption that non-honors students are not doing enough. As contrasted in the message students received as low-track students, students internalize messaging that tells them they are not good enough and not doing enough to succeed.

Amina also explained the way labels assigned to herself and her middle-track peers caused additional pressure to try to catch up with honors students. She said this competitive labeling created hesitation among non-honors students who were afraid to provide the teacher with the wrong answer:

Most regular students…tried way harder maybe because they knew they had to kind of catch up to the level of the, their peers or whatever. So they would try harder and they would be a little more hesitant to like participate in class more openly just because they would be afraid if their answer was wrong or they would get embarrassed.
Notice how Amina calls students who are not in honors courses “regular.” This label expresses the hierarchy honors labels create among students. Being regular is not as important as being “honors.” A Freirian lens reveals the way students internalized these labels and use them to make meaning about hierarchies in their lives.

Sidney also internalized the way teachers perceived non-honors students. She described her experience overhearing teachers discuss their frustrations with teaching low and middle track students. Sidney said:

[N]on honors students are just kind of annoying. They're over it, they're done with it. [T]hey're just, it's just a terrible class to have to teach. Like, you know, I deal with it because I like the honors classes and I like to teach the honors students, the kids who are interested in the subjects. But, you know, I have to teach these other classes and I'll deal with it only because I know I can like teach the other, the honors classes.

From Sidney’s response one can see the way teachers label students and how students are aware of educators’ perceptions and behaviors toward non-honors students. Over a decade after high school and Sidney still vividly recalls how teachers responded to her academic peer group.

Part of Amina’s struggles with confidence in school can be traced to the way her teachers compared honors and non-honors students. She said:

Teachers, even if they didn't do it intentionally, would sometimes compare us regular non-honors students with their honor classes saying that if we couldn't complete assignments on time, they were baffled because their honors classes had even more homework than us and they still did it. And it just made us feel as if there was something wrong with us that we couldn't do.

Haley described how external labels, like General for low-track classes, had an impact on how she saw herself in school. Haley said,

So I took a lower science class and everything was labeled G at the end. And so that G definitely did something, it weighed us down. I think everybody knew that this was the dumbed down version of the class…The types of people that were assigned to low class were definitely people with behavioral issues, people of color, definitely the people with more raggedy clothes or less affluent.
In lower-tracked classes, Amina explained that she was afraid to participate. As offered earlier in this section, Amina believed other students were also afraid and embarrassed to participate. She said,

Even if I knew that like it's the right answer, it was just be like, “ah, should I, or should I not?” It's really not, you know, like how everyone is in tiny boxes. So it wouldn't fit my personality if I just participate.

Amina later described the impact low and middle track course labeling had on her identity. She said,

I kept thinking that if I'm in average classes, that probably means I am average, and if I cannot even perform well in average classes, then that probably means I am a below average student. That mindset and bias further kept me away from even trying to register for honors classes or even trying to think that I could be as smart as those students who do take honors classes and get straight As in them. It made me feel like I am way beneath them and that I haven't reached my full potential.

Amina’s experience demonstrates how students feel inadequate when they do not excel in middle-track classes. Meanwhile, students in honors courses are celebrated. Participants overwhelmingly expressed an awareness of the ways teachers applauded honors students with assemblies and praise while often comparing non-honors students to their high-tracked peers in a way that made students feel inferior. For secondary educators, this data demonstrates the way students see and hear teachers reference honors and non-honors students. For administrators, the data show that assemblies for honors students have an injurious impact on non-honors students.

Long-Term Effects of Labeling Tracked Students

Not only does low-track enrollment in high school have long-term effects on students’ identities, but it also has long-term effects on a student’s mental health and self-esteem. Findings
in this section reveal the ways students internalize labels associated with low and middle track placement, and how those negative labels metastasize into adulthood. Consider the oppressive ways schools label students as “regular” and “general” while other peers are labeled “honors.” Over time, students who are “regular” come to see themselves as lesser than their peers.

**Effects of High School Low-Track Placement on Mental Health**

Data from the study reveal teachers’ punitive behaviors toward low and middle track students in high school included assumptions about intentionally choosing not to listen or try in class. Sidney described the long-term effects of being told in high school that she wasn’t listening or paying attention and what that meant to her mental health:

> It's just unfortunate cause I got told my entire high school, like, “You're not listening.” “Well, you're not doing this, you're not doing this.” “You're not a good student.” “Maybe if you would try”. And I'm sitting there going, I'm trying, I'm trying, am trying. And then it's just discouraging because they're like, “Well, you're not trying hard enough.” And it's like, no, I am. And so obviously that made me feel like, well, why should I try anyway? Because obviously my best is just not good enough. So obviously I'm never gonna be good enough. Um, so I think that contributed a lot to how I saw myself, now and then.

Jordan was told that he wasn’t paying attention, wasn’t trying in high school, and he was diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood. The labels assigned to Jordan in high school left a deep impact on his mental health. He explained how he internalized the insults:

> I think that contributed to that inferiority complex of like, “I will never be a good student, so why would I even try.” Just kind of being told I'm not doing something right my whole life with this like, external factor, no one considered I think I internalized it to just like, reject the whole system.

Because Jordan was not excelling in high school, his teachers labeled him as “lazy.” In other words, ignoring mental health, teachers assumed Jordan was not successful because he chose not
to try. This stereotyping is harmful not only in childhood, but well into adulthood—as both Jordan and Sidney show. Sidney—whose teachers claimed wasn’t listening—internalized those labels as evidence that she wasn’t/isn’t “good enough.” Jordan internalized high school labels like “lazy” and ultimately rejected school—and society—as a result of negative stereotypes.

Both Sidney and Jordan described the way others saw their lower-track enrollment and labeled them as the “dumb” classes. Jordan explained that he was seen as “stupid” because of his lower-track coursework, yet he noticed that since he “rejected school and didn't see the value in it” people assigned him this label. Jordan said other labels assigned to him and his friends in low-track classes, like “dumb,” had a lasting impact on him.

You know, these sort of things that were, in hindsight, you know, childish, high schooler things. But at the same time, you know, it's a very vital part of development at that age and that time. And, yeah, definitely I think affected people, including myself.

Jordan’s reflection on the labels his peers assigned to low-track students illustrate how the tracking perpetuates lies about people’s identities. From this study, we know students were powerless when it came to track assignment, and they were placed in an environment that was associated with negative labels like “dumb” and “slow.” The harm students endured as a result of negative labels in high school is alarming. This study should act as a call to action for educational settings that sort and separate students by so-called “ability.” The so-called skill-homogeneous courses are killing students’ self-worth.

Internalized Feelings of Inadequacy

This section illuminates ways low and middle-tracked students describe internalized feelings of inadequacy when taking honors courses for the first time in college. Sorting and ranking in high school, and the labels that are used to describe students in various tracks, impact
students taking honors courses for the first time in community college. Without any experience in an honors or AP course, students taking honors for the first time describe feelings of inadequacy, or more colloquially “imposter syndrome.”

Because Daniel’s high school teacher referenced how most Mexican-Americans work outside, Daniel still felt the impact of the racial stereotype as a community college honors student. Daniel said,

I guess just this unsureness sometimes if I’m past my time, you know, 30 years old. I'm here in class, everyone's young. Sometimes feeling like maybe I shouldn’t be in the class or something. Stuff like that. That's just me. Just gotta, I guess, be more sure of what I'm doing here. And I guess that goes back to that, those cultural barriers of like, should I really be here? I should be maybe working outside or something, you know? Daniel internalized racial stereotypes based on educational tracking in primary and secondary school. The assumption that Daniel, a Mexican-American, should be working outside emphasizes how Daniel recognizes racialized labels related to employment. At the beginning of this section, Jordan mentioned stereotypes about Asian-Americans excelling in math courses based on the racialized spaces in honors courses at his suburban high school. This data serves to illustrate how students view their place in the world based on labels assigned in primary and secondary school.

Once enrolled in community college honors, Jordan struggled with his new “honors” identity. He said,

I just don't feel like that's really who I am. I don't feel like an honors student. I feel like some kind of fraud who snuck his way in, which is weird and illogical and, you know, definitely based on my self-esteem issues.

Jordan recognizes the lack of logic that surrounds tracking labels. Emphasis on the way he feels like he “snuck his way in” shows that Jordan still feels like he does not belong in honors. Returning to early points Jordan made about the negative labels his teachers assigned him, we
can see how being told he wasn’t good enough or trying hard enough caused him to feel like a “fraud” in honors courses. This is further problematized when considering that a certain type of person belongs in honors courses, according to participants in this study. The fact that there is a type of person that belongs in a high-track class should be problematic to readers. In a democracy, education is a right. Students should not feel like they do not belong in educational settings, but the lies tracking tells students are hard to undo.

Sidney explained how she carried the weight of her high school teachers’ words into her college classrooms. She said,

[T]hat's one of the main things that I struggle with now being in college and being in upper-level classes. I'm like, I shouldn't be here. I feel like I'm gonna fail. Even if I try, I'm not gonna do well...I have like this fear of if I try to do these upper-level classes and I fail, it's just gonna like ingrain, like, “Oh look, my high school teachers were right. I shouldn't have gone into these classes anyway.”

Data in this section show the long-term effects of ranking students and the way they internalize feelings of inadequacy as a result. First-time honors students mention they don’t feel “part of this” and worry they will fail in honors courses. First-time honors students also describe an “unsureness” in honors courses, questioning if they should be in honors.

**Identities Changed by Honors Enrollment**

As this section reveals, enrollment in honors courses for the first time in community college greatly influences a students’ identity. Despite experiences with feeling inadequate upon initial entrance in honors courses, enrollment in honors has a positive impact on a students’ identity. After enrolling, community college students taking honors courses for the first time describe a shift in the way they identify themselves.
Newfound Confidence

In this subsection, students describe a newfound self-confidence as a result of their honors identity. Since high school low and middle-track placement led students to feel inferior to their peers in high-track courses, once enrolled in honors, participants explain how their identity changed. The majority of participants in the study described newfound confidence and attention from family and friends. In a previous section Amina explained that her teacher made students in middle-tracked courses feel inferior to honors students. Amina detailed how she believed in herself as a result of her honors enrollment:

I have evolved greatly as a student from high school especially by realizing that my worth is not tied to which classes I'm taking or how advanced they are for their level. I see myself in a different light. I am aware and I realize that I can do the things that I thought in high school that I couldn’t do. I can take honors classes, I can excel in honors classes, and there's nothing that I cannot do if I don't put my mind to it.

Like Amina, who uses the word “evolved” to describe her growth as a student, Haley also recognized the way she evolved as a student, which gave her confidence and hope. Recall from previous findings that by her junior year in high school Haley determined she was not going to college. She said,

I think the biggest part of me evolving as a student was believing in myself as being a student… I'm 22 now. And I did take time out of high school to get back into it. So I think that development, that real world skill was able to give me the passion and drive. And as well as the notion for necessity college was a necessity. Especially when you look at statistics between people who do and don't go, um, financially it's choice. But now also, I know it's the only way that I could truly pursue the career dream that I have.

Sidney, whose high school teachers assumed she didn’t care enough to pay attention, described in the “Breaking through Barriers” section of this chapter how she is more confident and happy as a result of honors classes. Here, she offered more insight about her ability to make
mistakes without feeling inadequate and her academic identity which resulted from her honors enrollment:

But now like I'm like, you know what, we're in honors, Like we're diving deep into these subjects and it's okay to make mistakes because that's how you get here and that's how you grow as like a person. So I definitely see myself in a different light from high school and then to my first college and now to my second college...I see myself in a way better light.

What’s troubling here is that clearly Sidney “belongs” in honors courses, but her secondary school did not offer her these opportunities. Instead, the secondary education system made Sydney feel like she was not good enough to be in school. The labels assigned to tracked classes, including honors in college, change the way Sidney sees herself—like she’s finally good enough. Yet, Sidney was always good enough. The lies that tracked classrooms tell students is that they are not good enough. Yet, if they are in honors, they are good enough. Students in the study consistently refer to the way they have evolved or made their families proud by being in honors; yet, they were always good enough.

When he first walked into the honors classroom, Eduardo initially doubted himself. While he later explained that he is “doing really good.” Using this data helps measure how students taking honors courses for the first time develop self-confidence. This newfound confidence is in direct contrast with the way first-time honors students described their academic identities in primary and secondary school. Those who once thought they were not good enough—or that they did not know enough—now see their futures as limitless as a result of community college honors enrollment. Yet, this is problematic and feeds into the lies that tracking tells students about their identities. You see, honors students in community college are just as good as non-honors students, yet, they do not see themselves as good enough until labeled in the tracked classroom.
Conclusion

Findings for the third research question about identity show the deep fissures caused by labels assigned to—and behaviors toward—low and middle-track students. Teachers’ attitudes and behaviors toward low and middle-track students have a long impact on a student’s self-confidence. Students taking honors for the first time in community college initially experience internalized feelings of inadequacy based on previous low and middle track placement. The findings show that students did not fault the instruction or curriculum in low and middle track courses as a reason for their internalized feelings of inadequacy; rather, the way teachers and students labeled them caused students to feel lesser than their honors peers. Findings also reveal that once a student takes an honors course, their self-confidence improves. One first-time honors student reported “there’s nothing that I cannot do if I don’t put my mind to it.”
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study sought to fill a gap in the literature on honors students. At the time of writing, there was a deficit in studies on students taking honors courses for the first time at community college. Because many community college students are marginalized and experience precarities (Hart, 2019; Tinto, 2012), this study looked at the barriers marginalized students faced when attempting to enroll in higher education without any prior honors or AP course experience. Participants in the study explain their barriers extend all the way back to primary school, given the way primary and secondary school tracks determine college placement (Gorski, 2018; Rubin et al., 2006). This chapter will connect previous analyses and studies with the current case study and offer implications of the findings regarding barriers marginalized students faced to reach college, perceived opportunities in community college honors, and the ways tracking impacts a student’s identity. The chapter also includes recommendations based on specified research areas of the study.

Discussion

Financial Barriers

When considering the large number of participants experiencing poverty who were placed in low and middle tracked classrooms, it is important to look back at Bratlinger’s (2003) research on social class and tracking. Administrators and teachers admit that they “took students’
social class status into account” when placing students into tracked classrooms (Bratlinger, 2003, p. 26). Bratlinger confirmed that students experiencing poverty are overwhelmingly placed in lower-track courses. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that five of the six participants in this study identified as growing up economically disadvantaged; in fact, 83-percent of the participants grew up in households that struggled financially, and all students in the study were placed in low and middle track classes. This data does not take into account Eduardo’s education in Venezuela.

Financial barriers also interfere with student success, as marginalized students in the study persistently reported in interviews that financial barriers intercepted their learning and ability to fit in with their middle-class peers. Sidney explained that students made fun of her backpack and used school supplies. She was also the only student without a computer at home. Amina did not participate in extracurricular activities in middle and high school because her family had one car. Jordan experienced homelessness and extreme hunger which caused him stress when trying to fit in with his peers. All of these responses to the financial barriers students faced in school align with Gorski’s (2018) investigation of the long-term effects of poverty and the far-reaching impact poverty has on students well into college. Like Jordan’s experience where he fights so many battles as a result of being economically marginalized, students who face “persistent adversity based on the accumulation of these inequities” suffer changes in their brains (Gorski, 2018, p. 97). While Gorski references studies from Lefmann and Combs-Orme, as well as Perrin, his emphasis on toxic stress and its impact on “people’s brains” is one to consider when thinking about the various ways Jordan described how “a lot of that trauma relates back to poverty and being homeless and just stuff like that too.” Jordan emphasized that it was
hard to fit in because of his inability to relate to others as a result of his family’s lack of financial resources.

As mentioned in Chapter One, economically disadvantaged students with parents who cannot afford test-prep tutors lose out to their more affluent peers whose families can afford resources to enhance test scores, which improve a student’s chance at scholarships and college entrance (Gorski, 2018; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Data from Haley’s interview reveal her family did not have money for SAT tutors, which she emphasized as a reason she did not consider attending a university. For many students, community college is the affordable option for earning a higher education degree. Yet, the following section unveils ways systems of privilege are perpetuated through scholarship programs for community college honors students.

Financial Barriers: Financing College

As mentioned in Chapter 1, for economically marginalized families who receive Pell Grant funds, the $6,495 annual aid only covers 25% of full college tuition (College Foundation). For students with high GPAs, 3.5/4.0 minimum, and a strong application essay, Midhills offers three honors scholarships: full tuition up to 64 credits, $2,500 per year, and $1,000 per year. As mentioned in Chapter One, data from the honors program at Midhills Community College illustrate dynamic differences between economically marginalized first-time honors students and those who do not qualify for Pell Grant funding. Between the Fall 2016 semester to Summer 2021, over 59% of community college first-time honors students received merit-based scholarships and no Pell funds, while 12.6% of merit-based scholars received Pell funds. See Tables 5 and 6 in Chapter 4 for quantity and percentage data by scholarship and no scholarship.
An opportunity gap is perpetuated through the honors scholarship program when almost 60% of the honors students receive a scholarship to enter community college honors courses, while those who are in financial need represent only 12.6% of honors scholarship recipients. In this study, only one student, Jordan, received Pell Grant funding; another participant, Sidney, did qualify for Pell funds during her first college attempt. Jordan had to emancipate himself from his parents, claim independence, and struggle with home and food insecurity in order to qualify for Pell Grant funding.

Most of the study participants fall in the following data set: only 20% of the honors students enrolled with neither Pell funds nor a merit-scholarship (all data from Midhills R&A, Oct. 2021). What the data show is that socioeconomically privileged groups are receiving scholarships almost two out of three times more often than marginalized students. To afford community college courses in a program where 60-percent of the students are receiving merit-based tuition support, students in the study work to pay tuition, or make sacrifices like attempting to do a semester’s worth of school work in a week to stay within the free-trial window of a publisher’s online textbook component.

Vulnerable students are being pushed further into the margins as a result of having to finance community college. Additionally, the honors scholarships at Midhills have the same GPA and SAT barriers that many colleges and universities have, so the same barriers that keep students from attending universities remain at an open-enrollment college where students need tuition assistance. If these students received scholarships to finance Midhills tuition, they would not need to work full-time to pay for college courses. Recall they are in a program where 80% of the students receive some form of financial assistance—either a scholarship or Pell Grant.
Social classes are reinforced in public schools, with low-tracked classrooms serving a higher concentration of students in lower-socioeconomic standing (Hochschild, 2003). Social classes are sorted and separated by low and high tracks—between vocational and college-bound strata (Ruben et al., 2006; Shavit et al., 2007). Placement in high tracked classes is determined by variables such as test scores, grades, and parental involvement (Archbald et al., 2009; Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Haggartman, 2015). The ways students are placed in low and middle-tracked classes—without their own active will—determines where they can apply for college.

Students in this study overwhelmingly emphasized that they had no control over their low and middle track placement. This institutional power and assigned track classrooms places lifelong disadvantages on high school students, including limiting their ability to attend various universities. In Haley’s case, the school controlled the knowledge Haley would obtain—and her opportunities—by withholding information about the importance of AP coursework. In her interview, Haley explained that she wished she knew the importance of taking AP courses in high school. Haley’s experience represents the way Ball uses Foucauldian theory to describe power within the education system. To Foucault, educational power exists in the production of knowledge and control over what will be known (Ball, 2012). In Haley’s case, the school controlled the knowledge Haley would obtain—and her opportunities—by withholding information about the importance of AP coursework.

Other participants explained that their teachers told them they could not take honors courses, which aligns with Rubin et al.’s (2006) study about high track enrollment and university acceptance. Research shows that students in low and middle track courses will not reach the
math qualifications for four-year universities, while those in high-tracked math will qualify for selective universities (Rubin et al., 2006). Sidney’s teacher told her that some people “just aren’t good at math” and should “go into the trades.” This type of evidence proves that teachers label students and stereotype them with stratified employment labels, such as those who are not good at math should go into the trades.

A lack of cultural capital, a person’s inherited educational privilege based on their family’s resources and academic/employment background (Bourdieu, 1986), weighed heavily on students in the study who explained their parents were unable to help with college applications, FAFSA forms, and even homework. Data from this study align with Rubin et al. (2006) and Noguera and Wing (2006) who found that students who lacked cultural capital were more likely placed in low-track classes by counselors who were overloaded. Cultural capital enhances a student’s ability to navigate college entrance barriers, while a lack of cultural capital leaves students dependent on school counselors and public school college-prep curricula. Interviews and digital diary recordings in the study revealed that the majority of the participants could not rely on their parents for help filling out college and financial aid applications. Coupled with a lack of financial resources, students in the study were left with few options for higher education; so, they turned to community college. Data about cultural capital confirm the findings of this study, since Wing’s (2006) research shows most students who start at a four-year institution are those who were placed in higher tracked classes in secondary schools and had the social and cultural capital necessary to secure college acceptance.

With few resources at home, students in the study relied on educators and counselors to help them map their academic paths. The results echo Willis’s (1977) research on the labor class where schools educate students as workers. Sidney—who grew up in a low-income household
with parents who did not go to college—revealed in her interview that her counselor deterred her from going to a university. Sidney’s first attempt at college was at a culinary school after receiving a scholarship; Sidney was in a technical track in high school where students prepared for careers.

Participants in the study expressed ways teachers labeled low-track students as workers. Research on counter-culture groups explains how teachers who belittle students represent “one of the most oppressive forces” (Willis, 1977, p. 77). Jordan, Sidney, and Daniel described various ways teachers belittled them, either through racial comments, as in Daniel’s experience, or in comments about how they were not trying hard enough—or listening in class. Sidney’s interview revealed the therapy she has undergone in order to process this type of belittling behavior. The institutional control, ranging from involuntary placement in low-track courses to demeaning comments from authority figures, like “you guys aren't good enough to be recognized,” have long-term effects on students’ mental health, which is covered in the identity section of Chapters 4 and 5.

Beyond the way teachers spoke to students using punitive language, this study also reveals ways teachers had assumptions about the types of employment and career options based on tracks. Here we see how sorting and ranking students in tracks results in stratification. Connecting data from this study to Thompson’s (2002) study, students in high-tracked classes will join the middle class while students in low-tracks will most likely be in the working class. Data from findings show that teachers assumptions about low-track students correlate with Thompson’s findings where low-track students are most-likely in the working class. The ways teachers spoke to students in low-track classes as reported in the findings certainly emphasize how students in those tracks are educated as workers.
Tracking and Identity

Students taking honors courses for the first time at community college are aware of the labels assigned to them in high school. The impact of these social and behavioral labels causes students to doubt their abilities in high-achieving classrooms. Students assign labels to peers based on academic track, which include racialized stereotypes as a result of classroom sorting. “Stereotype threat” exists in academic domains when negative stereotypes about groups of people cause “fear of being reduced to those stereotypes” (Steele, 1997, p. 614). When tracking segregates students by race or social class, negative stereotypes persist. Labels and tracking also align with the literature in Foucauldian theory area described as producing learned behaviors that prepare students to mirror “society’s anticipation and values” (Bogdanova & Abrosimova, 2019, p. 132). As the implications section reveal, tracking produces learned behaviors which students internalize. They not only see themselves as lesser when enrolled in lower-track classes, but they also learn about society’s values through tracking-specific spaces, like assemblies.

Academic tracks are absolutely shaping students. Dewey’s publication in the *Journal of Education* (1916) warned against sorting and sifting students and suggested the practice was anti-democratic. What this study shows is that separating students by so-called ability has harmful and lasting impacts on their self-confidence. Tracking also contributes to the way students form stereotypes from various tracked classrooms. Dewey suggests vocational schools “drill boys and girls into certain forms of automatic skill” which aids others and not the individual (p. 268). The result of secondary education that tracks students into vocational lanes, like culinary courses as in Sidney’s case, contribute to ways students see themselves and their futures.
Tyson (2011) and Clotfelter (2004) outline ways tracking segregates students. Clotfelter (2004) states academic tracks are more segregated than if classes were randomly assigned because students in different racial groups are disproportionately assigned in tracks. Data from interviews and digital diaries recorded for this study prove ways students assign racial stereotypes to students based on track placement. Findings show students recognized Asian and Indian students as “AP honors kids,” and participants recognize that stereotypes are formed from this observation, such as “Asian people are smarter, better at math.”

Findings from this study also reveal that only one Black student was visible in an AP course. Reasons for low enrollment of Black students in AP courses are supported by research on “discriminatory placements and parental pressure” cited in Clotfelter’s study (p. 131). Other reasons include Black students’ desires to remain with their same-race peers and pursue coursework that isn’t “presumed [difficult],” as revealed in Tyson’s (2011) research (p. 161). Research shows that “few high-achieving black students shared advanced courses with same-race peers” (Tyson, 2011, p. 161), which aligns with Haley’s comment about her friend being the only Black student in AP English. However, research also shows that when placed in high-tracked classes in diverse high schools, Black students report feeling isolated, resented, and labeled for being smart, or being separated into high-tracked classes, and often leave gifted classrooms to be with friends (Thompson, 2002; Tyson, 2011). When considering the ways students in this study described assemblies, non-honors students watching honors students on stage, Tyson’s research is reborn. Tyson (2011) argues tracking, a form of “desegregation without integration” (p. 6) contributes to the way students identify whiteness with intelligence.
As presented in Chapter 3, the majority of the honors students at Midhills are White while only 1.3% of the honors students are Black or African American. The student population at Midhills Community College is different from the county itself. Data from Midhills shows new honors students from 2016-21 included a population that was 62% White, 16.4% Asian, 14% Hispanic, 1.3% Black or African American, 3.5% students with two or more races, and 2.7% identified as “other/unknown” (Midhills CC R & A, 2021). Much like Haley’s observation, Midhills continues to perpetuate racially segregated spaces in honors with very few students identifying as Black or African American. Different than the participants’ observations about race in high school, the findings show more students identifying as Hispanic are present in the community college honors classroom.

**Negative Labels Assigned to Tracked Students**

Unique to this study is how low-track students’ voices were amplified to illustrate ways they internalize labels assigned to them by their peers and teachers. Labels like “scummy and gross” and appearance labels like having a “rugged backpack” remain a part of low-track students’ identities well into adulthood. Two participants revealed they sought professional therapy to work through the negative labels assigned to them as children. Research confirms the way students are treated at school influences their motivation and learning (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Steele, 1997). Studies of middle school students are similar in result; students view non-honors learners as “academically slow,” “bad,” and “nonlearners,” while honors students are “motivated, hard workers, and smart” (Legette, 2018, p. 1323).
Because they were labeled in primary and secondary school as underachieving and lazy, students in the study struggled with internalized feelings of inadequacy. Oakes’s early study on tracking illustrated that high-tracked students saw their teachers as “more concerned” and “less punitive” than low track students (p. 124). To build on Oakes’s original study about the visible difference with concerned teachers in high-track courses, it is important to look at Sainio et al.’s study of Finnish students. Research on teacher-student closeness confirm that students who experience lower teacher closeness experience boredom and “learning-related anger” (Sainio, 2023, p. 160). Meanwhile, students who experience close teacher-student relationships have positive academic-related emotions (Sainio et al, 2023). Additionally, research on Australian teacher’s perceptions of low-track and high-track students confirms that teachers see low-track students’ “abilities” as more fixed, where high-track students have limitless possibilities (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). Similar to this study, Ladwig and McPherson found teachers describe low-track students’ abilities in the same way Sidney heard her teachers describe her and her low track peers. For example, Teacher C in Ladwig and McPherson’s study believes many students are not suited for school. Likewise, Sidney’s teacher explained some students aren’t good at math. These examples of fixed mindset illustrate ways teachers assume low-track students are trapped in this lower strata.

Alternatively, when originally low-tracked students have positive experiences with their professors in the community college honors program, students describe positive academic-related emotions, however, this study shows a transitional period between negative and positive feelings toward school. Applying this information to the current study, it is clear that Jordan’s rejection of school could likely be the result of “learning-related anger” that developed from his relationships with his teachers who thought he was lazy. Sidney also mentioned ways her
teachers used negative labels to define her learning style. Again, the data from this study confirm others mentioned in this Discussion section.

Data from interviews and digital diaries reveal students initially felt like they did not belong in honors courses, due to their lack of experience in honors in high school—and as a result of being labeled as “regular,” “non-honors” and low or middle-track students. Steele’s (1997) research on ability stigmatization in schools is a theoretical explanation for why students internalized feelings of inadequacy which turned into “disidentification” and “esteem-saving” rejection of the domain in which they are being stereotyped (p. 623). Consider the way Jordan learned how to game the system just to get by, how Haley did not plan on attending college after being pushed out of AP and honors, and how Daniel questioned if he should be “working outside.” All of these reactions show how students in the study disidentified with school as a result of being placed in low and middle track courses.

**Opportunities in Honors**

Research on community college honors programs shows they offer vast resources like more-experienced professors, a program director, experiential learning activities, and a high-emphasis on innovation and critical thinking (Byrne, 1998; Kane, 2001; Kisker & Outcult, 2005; Outcalt, 1999; Tarasova, 2019). Students in the study support previous research and explain ways they have additional access to professors and the program director, and enjoy the innovative design of honors classrooms. Interviews and digital diary data also reveal that students benefit from the critical thinking and dialogic inquiry in honors courses.
Freirean critical theories include a student’s construction of knowledge through dialogue. Educators following Freirean practices use problem-posing and constant questioning as a way for learners to construct knowledge (Freire, 1985). Students in this study lauded how their professors encouraged them to dig deeper in classroom discussions. Sidney described the way honors courses encourage students to “synthesize the content more intensely.”

Like previous research on the opportunities in honors programs including an honors director and more-experienced professors (Kisker & Outcult, 2005) and earning higher GPAs and higher graduation rates in community college (Honeycutt, 2019), this study revealed that students recognize differences in their non-honors and honors professors, along with the role of the honors director. This study is not longitudinal and cannot measure graduation rates. Given the early part of the fall semester when the data were collected, this study does not measure GPA and cannot add to data on that particular variable. However, returning to data on professors and the honors director, participants in the study noted the various ways their professors encouraged, supported, and enhanced their learning. Kisker and Outcult (2005) found that honors professors were more likely than developmental professors to have their doctorate and to have published books and journal articles. The pair also found that honors faculty guided students to universities for transfer (Kisker & Outcult, 2005). Students in the study mentioned panels featuring transfer institutions, which align with the way Kisker and Outcult note how honors faculty guide students to transfer.
Honors Transfer Scholarships

Students in the study overwhelmingly noted the number one reason for taking community college honors classes was to earn transfer scholarships. The results align with previous research on motivators for community college honors enrollment including scholarship opportunities and more access to faculty (Chen, 2020; Honeycutt, 2019). Given this information, it is important to connect research on stratification in education which shows inequality in higher education will continue to exist based on the lack of substantial financing available for students in low and middle socioeconomic standing (Shavit et al., 2007). The issue here is that financing is not available for the majority of community college honors students. Given their struggles to finance college in the first place, students in the study represent a perpetuated state of vulnerability when they seek to break through previous financial barriers by taking honors courses. This implies that the students believe in the prospect of obtaining a transfer scholarship through the community college honors program. Meanwhile, on the Midhills Honors Program website, four local private universities offer transfer scholarships for Midhills honors students, three of which offer full tuition. In a program with over 250 students, four will receive a transfer scholarship.

Implications

Financial Barriers

This study overwhelmingly shows the way finances are a deep burden for students preparing to attend a four-year institution. Families who struggle financially have few resources to pay for additional SAT exams or college-prep tutors. The implications of the findings on
financial barriers show students living in poverty are outcast by their peers and later labeled for having “rugged” clothing and school supplies. Families living in the margins also find themselves unable to afford repairs on washing machines for clean clothes; one financial setback can be devastating to a family in poverty. Students applying for colleges must make sacrifices when their families cannot afford college application fees. Data from this study show students in economically disadvantaged homes will not apply to colleges because of the application fees.

Once in college, students from economically disadvantaged families still struggle to qualify for Pell aid, and some are forced to emancipate themselves from their families. While on their own, students struggle to pay for textbooks and even housing. This same vulnerable population suffers even at a college that is considered a “bargain institution.”

Furthermore, economically disadvantaged students in an honors program with 60% of the student body attending school with a scholarship are further disadvantaged when they have to work to pay their tuition. The implications of findings show opportunity hoarding still exists in an open-access institution designed to help all students access college. Instead, honors scholarships with GPA and SAT score barriers are harming economically marginalized students who did not attend a university, more than likely due to the same barriers that honors scholarships require for their recipients.

Tracking and Stratification

Interviews and digital diaries in this study collected data about ways teachers told students they weren’t as good as the honors students, placing emphasis on how honors students behaved and completed assignments. The effects of this delineation based on tracking extended
to school assemblies. School assemblies and assumptions made about students in low and middle track courses also contributed to the way students saw themselves in the world, like Freire’s “life world” (1985). At assemblies honoring honors students, non-honors students felt like they were not good enough to be recognized. Data from this study also revealed way assemblies for honors students made students resent and reject school, since they were not being celebrated.

The findings on labels assigned to students in tracked classrooms show how social class is associated with course track. In other words, students in low-track classrooms were associated with low socio-economic standing, while their honors peers were associated with more affluence. The implications of the findings on tracking and stratification isolate ways tracking sorts and separates students by social class. Taken further, consider how a school assembly with more affluent honors students on stage and less-affluent low-track students in the audience impacts the ways students see their “life world” (Freire, 1985). If the media isn’t already pushing materialism and ownership of “stuff” as precedent over one’s mental health and satisfaction, students’ schools are advancing this bogus narrative by showcasing academic tracks heavily populated with affluent students. As Sidney mentioned in the study, this type of sorting made her feel like she wasn’t good enough to be recognized. Add to that the toxic stress of growing up in poverty and a student’s self-confidence is diminished further.

The implications of the findings on track placement related to stratification show students whose teachers labeled them as not academic or not good at math found it difficult to believe in themselves. Based on digital diary and interview recordings, it is clear that the messages students receive when they are placed in lower tracked classes is that they are not good enough. Whether it’s the fact that they feel they aren’t good enough to be recognized, or their teachers are outright saying they aren’t as good as the honors students has a lasting impact on how students see
themselves as students. It’s no wonder more students do not drop out. If the school sends a message to students that they aren’t good enough and don’t belong in college, what reasons do schools give to children to stay in school?

Tracking and Race

The implications of the findings on tracking and race show how high-tracked classrooms are populated with White students. Jordan also noticed how “Asian and Indian” students were in honors courses. Jordan explained how racial stereotypes are borne from racialized classrooms, noting how “Asians are good at math” based on the high population of Asian students he noticed in honors and AP courses. Additionally, Haley noted that only one Black student was in an honors English course in her high school. Racial demographics from Haley’s high school in AP courses could not be gathered in 2023. However, the researcher gathered data from 2021, when the Illinois Report Card featured a variable of measurement called “Early College Coursework.” In that data, Haley’s high school had 391 students taking one or more AP courses their senior year. The AP senior students at Haley’s high school consisted of 33 low income, 266 White, 65 Hispanic, and 42 Asian. No Black students took AP courses at Haley’s high school in 2021. This data aligns with Haley’s comments about AP courses. Recall that Haley did not even know the importance of AP courses and the impact on college preparedness. The implications are astounding. Consider how AP courses help students earn college credit in high school, thereby saving families money on college tuition. Consider how AP courses help students with college entrance requirements. Now, consider how having no Black students in AP courses impacts the Black and African American community, already marginalized in myriad ways.
Returning to the honors assembly that students in the study revealed in multiple ways, what does an assembly with 266 White students look like to people of color sitting in the stands? From this study’s research, we can see how racial stereotypes are perpetuated through school assemblies honoring honors students. Students of White, Asian, and Indian racial backgrounds appear “intelligent” while other races who are less represented on an honors stage are identified as less intelligent. As students make meaning out of their life-world, they will internalize beliefs about intelligence and race when honors spaces are racialized.

How do students of various racial groups view Black and African American students—and later colleagues and co-workers—when that racial group was excluded from being honored at an assembly? We know racial stereotypes are formed based on academic domains (Steele, 1997), so we must know that putting all the White students on stage sends a very strong signal about who is celebrated and who is to applaud the celebrated students. This stratifying subservience is highly problematic. It sends a message to students that White students should be celebrated.

**Negative Labels for Low-Track Students**

Taking it a step further, if educators continue to push narratives that people who don’t excel at school go into the trades, a negative connotation is associated with people who work in the trades. Students make meaning from their surroundings. Plumbers and electricians make more money than professors, yet as early as primary school, like Sidney and Daniel revealed, teachers are using janitors and groundkeepers as an example of people who did not do well in school. As if that’s the punishment. The implications of the findings suggest that primary and
secondary educators’ behaviors toward non-academic careers and classes leave a negative impact on students—into adulthood.

Opportunities in Honors

Honors Faculty

The implications of the findings on opportunities in honors show faculty are noticeably more encouraging and supportive of students’ independent research projects. Findings in the study also reveal the ways honors professors were more accessible to students through office hours. This is likely because most honors faculty at Midhills are full-time/tenure-track professors who are provided an office on campus. The implications of the findings show that having a physical space on campus encourages students to visit professors. At Midhills, full-time faculty have offices while adjunct instructors have temporary seating with computers. There are a few offices for meetings on campus. Data from this study show students find a noticeable benefit in visiting faculty on campus, which suggests the need for more meeting places for adjunct faculty.

Another way to view the findings on first-time honors students’ perspectives of opportunities in the program is to look at the full-time to part-time faculty ratios. At Midhills in 2023, 279 full-time faculty were employed while 2,124 part-time faculty taught courses to nearly 22,000 students (“Midhills Facts,” 2023). In total, roughly 11% of the faculty teaching students at Midhills are employed full-time. As mentioned, full-time faculty have offices and ten contracted office hours per week; they are also required to professional development at in-service and through six hours per year. Adjunct faculty are paid roughly 3,000-dollars per class and often work at multiple institutions to earn a livable wage.
As Kisker and Outcult’s (2009) study showed honors faculty tend to be more experienced, more published educators. The implications of the way students describe opportunities in honors as access to their professors during office hours, and the level of dialogic inquiry and engaging conversations in class reflect the unequal structures of faculty within Midhills community college. If honors faculty are full-time employees, and only 11% of the teaching workforce is full-time, then the honors students at Midhills are guaranteed access to full-time faculty on a campus where tenured instructors are quite rare. The implications of the findings show when colleges invest in hiring full-time employees, students succeed. Students benefit from engaging with faculty outside of classroom hours. But faculty must hold office hours for students to gain access to them.

Classroom and Campus Design

Certainly, the implications of the findings show that classroom setting, including moving desks or chairs in a circle, leaves a lasting impact on students and their learning. All participants noted the more challenging and in-depth discussions in honors courses. The findings revealed that students recognize enhanced dialogic inquiry and critical thinking in their honors courses. The classroom setting contributed to the way students were able to see each other as they talked in class. Rather than rows of desks or tables like they saw in their non-honors courses, students who could see and hear each other felt invested in the circular-shaped class conversations. Additionally, participants explained the way all honors students in their courses were engaged and fully-invested in learning and assignments.
Another physical space on campus was described as an opportunity by students in the study. In interviews, students described how they could visit the Honors Office and ask questions or receive information about upcoming events. One participant mentioned getting a swag bag with pens and bookmarks from the office. Another noted how she was able to stop by to ask a question about enrolling in honors. The honors director was also mentioned many times as a resource and liaison between honors students and honors events, including scholarship information from universities. The implications of the findings emphasize the importance of a program director and support staff to connect students with resources for success. This does not need to be honors-specific.

Combining the implications of the findings in the opportunities section of this study show that community colleges need more full-time faculty and program coordinators on campuses to aid students. An honors director is a faculty liaison between students, their professors, and transfer universities. The study shows that students benefit from having a physical space on campus dedicated to their learning and academic progress. The implications of the findings show that other programs, like English, could benefit from having a program director with a physical office so students know where to go to locate answers about their academic paths.

Scholarship Opportunities

In this study with five of the six participants self-identifying as economically disadvantaged, it is not surprising that students overwhelmingly enrolled in honors courses for financial reasons. Participants saw honors enrollment as a means to scholarship opportunities at transfer institutions. This sample size unintentionally revealed ways marginalized students—who
were also excluded from the majority of the community college honors students who received a Midhills scholarship—saw their participation in honors courses as a source for upward mobility. This is a troubling result, given the hardships these students have faced in the past.

In the Breaking Through Barriers section of Chapter 4, the only significant breakthrough was the perception of upward mobility. Students in the study were already pursuing ways to secure scholarships from transfer institutions. For example, Daniel was applying for over twenty scholarships; Haley believed her university tuition would be fully paid for through a scholarship; Amina planned on attending any school that offered her a scholarship; Sidney enrolled in PTK for access to scholarships. The greater concern with their perspectives—that honors courses will lead to a pathway to fund college—shows how this vulnerable population is pushed into a continued state of vulnerability. What if these students do not get a transfer scholarship like they thought? Here, economic marginalization and social stratification persists.

The findings suggest that community colleges should expand honors scholarships to include those who did not have access to university scholarships. In other words, community colleges should not offer scholarships with the same requirements as university acceptance. Barriers like GPA and test scores—along with entrance essays that promote the same students who had access to honors resources in high school—should be re-evaluated. The implications of the findings on scholarships show that marginalized students who did not take honors courses in high school also do not have direct access to community college scholarships.

Furthermore, transfer scholarships were a major reason why community college students chose to take honors courses, yet only four universities offered scholarship opportunities to Midhills students. Of the four universities, only three offered full tuition. The other institution offered $10,000, with tuition, room and board costing $38,850 per year. The problem here is that
even a student earning a $10,000 scholarship, the out-of-pocket cost to the student is $28,850 for this private university; that’s not including any loans or grants offered from the state.

**Tracking and Identity**

The implications of the findings on tracking and identity illuminate the ways students label their peers in tracked classrooms. Data from digital diary recordings and interviews reveal that students assign social class and intelligence labels to students in various tracked classrooms. Appearance labels like “scummy and gross” were assigned to low-track high school students, while honors students were associated with “preppiness.” Behaviors like “unprepared” were assigned to low-track students in high school and those with a “slacker vibe” were non-honors in community college. In contrast, honors students were described as “going above and beyond” and “confident.” Applying Steele’s (1997) research on domain-specific identity to data from this study, it is interesting to see that the label assigned to honors students, particularly “confident” are eventually adopted by participants in the study—when they took an honors course.

Despite feeling inadequate in honors upon entrance in the classroom, a profound discovery in this study is that no matter how painful a students’ secondary school experience was, including the negative impact it had on their self-confidence, enrolling in honors courses provided increase self-confidence. What this means is simply by taking an honors course at a community college, students felt they were good enough for future aspirations like attending a transfer university and maintaining a supportive career. Since many students in the study explained there wasn’t any additional work for an honors course, and the discussions in class were more fruitful, the data show that the main factor in increasing self-confidence is one of
domain-specific self-perception. In other words, the main benefit to first-time honors students is the self-perception of domain-specified identity; the “honors” label is associated with confidence and thereby students perceive themselves as confident.

Recommendations Based on Findings

Scholarships

Hart’s (2019) research shows the difficulties community college students face when juggling work and school schedules. Hart notes students often choose work over school schedules, changing their academic plans to support their jobs. This study showed that students did not participate in the opportunities offered through the honors program due to their job responsibilities. Using the figures from scholarship recipients at Midhills and data from this study, it is recommended that community colleges review and revise their honors scholarship barriers to consider ways to create a more equitable tuition assistance process. Marginalized students whose families could not afford to send their child to a university should not be further penalized at a community college and pushed out of scholarship opportunities by students who could qualify for university scholarships with their high GPAs and strong essays.

The data show that more resources need to be dedicated to students who were not in honors or AP courses in high school; furthermore, community colleges cannot use merit-based barriers to gift students tuition. Over seventy-percent of the students in Midhills’ data collection over five years received scholarship funds for the honors program. Yet, no students in this study received scholarship funds. And five of the six students self-identify as economically disadvantaged. Lin et al.’s (2020) study suggests that when resources are dedicated to an
underrepresented population in community college, an increase in graduation and completion rates should be the outcome. It is recommended that honors scholarships at community colleges expand to include students who are taking honors for the first time.

**Transparency in Honors Scholarship Availability**

Participants in this study overwhelmingly noted they enrolled in honors courses in order to apply for honors scholarships at transfer universities. The main recommendation in this section is to offer realistic data about the probability of earning an honors scholarship at a transfer institution. It is important to note the growth in the community college honors program at Midhills, which now enrolls 252 people, as of the fall 2022 semester. With less barriers to honors enrollment, more students qualify and take honors courses. If more students enroll in honors with the hope of getting their university tuition paid for, and the number of scholarships—and funds—remain the same, then the chance of earning an honors scholarship reduces the more students enroll in the program. Returning to the analogy of entry-level employees working to earn a higher position and wage, more scholarship funds from more universities have to open up—just like more high-paid/high-profile jobs in the employment analogy—in order for more students to receive tuition assistance through scholarships. In this way, as with the middle school course map through college discussed below, the recommendation is to inform students about the realities of the prospect of tuition scholarships.
Tracking and Preparation for College

Ultimately interviews and digital diaries in this study show that tracking stratifies students, which is confirmed in the literature ((Hochschild, 2003; Ruben et al., 2006; Shavit et al., 2007). Based on the findings in this study, students and their parents should have more control over where they are placed in the tracked system. In middle school, administrators should provide students and families high school course maps—similar to pathways for college majors (Bailey et al., 2015)—which include college and university prospects. The course maps should include the student’s high school and college trajectory based on their eighth grade math and course placement. It should also include various paths to varied tier colleges, from community colleges to elite universities. Adopting course maps for high school and college planning as early as middle school will give students and families a choice in the direction their children take in high school. This is not a recommendation to put students on an academic discipline-specific path, like Pathways in community college; instead, it is a recommendation for more transparency between schools and families, so parents and students are aware of the way middle school placement impacts college entrance. If remediation and additional courses are needed to enroll in a higher math course for future college acceptance, students and parents will have this knowledge in advance. That way, students like Haley will not realize senior year that they should have taken summer math courses and enrolled in AP courses to expand their options for college.

The researcher suggests that prior to enrolling students in eighth grade, parents and caregivers must be provided with pathway options that map their student’s current placement through high school coursework to college. In other words, parents must see college requirements prior to their child’s entrance into high school. This information will help families
prepare additional resources at the school necessary to help their child fulfill college and career plans.

Colleges and universities should provide transparent information about admissions, so parents are aware that universities consider honors and AP courses on college applications. For example, on their webpage for first-year applicants, University of Illinois states: “We’ll consider the high school curriculum, Advanced Placement courses, honors courses, and extracurricular activities that are available specifically to you” (“How We Review”). Since the researcher was helping her children apply for college while writing this dissertation, she is aware of the Self-Reported Student Academic Record, or SSAR, which requires students to list every course, academic track, and grade they received in high school. For example, if a student took Freshman honors Geometry for their math course, the student selects Geometry for the first and second semester of high school, chooses the level/proficiency of “honors” from a list of options including “standard,” “advanced,” “honors,” and “AP (Advanced Placement),” and enters their grade for the course. Do parents know that colleges review each course, grade, and course track for every class their student took in high school? Alternatively, what do colleges look for on the SSAR? How many “standard” classes are acceptable? How many “honors” courses are they seeking from the students SSAR? These questions and more should be answered by universities and provided to parents of eighth grade students, so children know how their track and grades will impact college acceptance.
Classroom and Campus Spaces

Given the evidence on ways students benefit from the honors classroom setting, and findings that illustrate how students learn better in a circular desk arrangement, educators and community colleges should rearrange their learning spaces. The classroom architecture matters, and desks should be student-facing, meaning students should be able to see each other. Also, based on the findings, professors should problem pose and ask critical questions to get students to engage in their own meaning making about topics. Students in the study noticed how non-honors courses spoon-fed information to students and their fellow colleagues were less-engaged in class. If non-honors courses modeled honors spaces, students would be encouraged to make sense of their life-world through meaning-making and problem-posing (Freire, 1985).

Previous chapters illuminate the ways circular classroom architecture contributes to a horizontal model of teaching, where teachers and students are on the same continuum. Extending this idea, the vertical model of teaching, where the teacher is at the top and the students are at the bottom of the vertical line, is very much represented in classrooms where desks are in vertical rows while the teacher is the “sage on the stage.” This study shows problem posing is encouraged in the horizontal model, where teachers and students are physically placed at the same level—in an architectural design that does not differentiate power structures.

Tracking and Labeling Students

Beyond educating families about course placement and college entrance, schools need to structure teacher professional development around ways to discuss various tracks with an equity-driven mindset. As the data revealed, even all-school assemblies for honors students have a deep
impact on non-honors learners, who see themselves as not worthy of recognition—or “not good enough.” With this knowledge, educators should consider best practices for all-school assemblies.

More attention should be given to students who are unseen, those in the margins, than to those who are seen—those the school dedicates assemblies and resources. Consider Freire’s life world, educators and administrators must be aware of the messages honors assemblies and loudspeaker announcements send to students who already feel academically inadequate. More all-inclusive celebrations are needed in our primary and secondary schools to help low and middle track students feel confident in school. In this study, it only took a course or two labeled “honors” for students to gain confidence in their academic abilities. Because of this, schools should consider open access to honors courses.

Based on the impact honors enrollment has on formerly low and middle-track students, including an increase in self-confidence, community college honors courses should be available to all students. If community colleges are to truly serve students who are disproportionately marginalized, then they also must provide opportunities for all students to experience an improved sense of self. Given the dialogic inquiry and critical thinking promoted in honors courses, all students should have access to higher-order thinking curricula. All students should have access to full-time faculty who have offices on campus. All students should be given the opportunity to be honors students, if high schools denied them this chance.

Tying in a middle school course map with open access to honors courses in high school will help a larger population of students meet college entrance requirements. But this requires a partnership with colleges and universities who need to be more transparent about the number of honors courses they seek from high school students. Ultimately, the recommendation is for a
trilateral approach to college entrance, uniting middle schools, high schools, and colleges to improve college entrance success.

More Government Funding in Education

The researcher would be remiss if she did not emphasize a point made by Labaree (2013). The federal and state governments were offering 40% more funding in the 20th Century. Now, they cover only 10% of a university’s costs. The rest of the cost has become the burden of American families. We see from this study just how deeply families are impacted by the cost of college tuition. We see how desperate students in community college are to find any means possible to finance college. Honors programs in community college present an opportunity for students to receive transfer scholarships, but only a small portion of the honors population will receive a transfer scholarship. Ladson-Billings’s (2006) discussion of the education deficit needs attention. The federal and state governments must reinvest in education in order to fix Americans. If we want to help Americans get out of poverty, we must not keep them in poverty. If we want people in poverty to get out of poverty by going to college, we must put them in academic paths that help them get to college—not put them in tracks that keep them in poverty.

Fixed educational paths that keep students from pursuing higher education are anti-democratic. In fact, after reading this study, it should be apparent that tracking traps students in low-track classes and advantages privileged classes. If low-track classes deter students from going to college—and in some cases track them out of qualifying for college—then we all should be alarmed at the power the education system has over certain populations. This calls attention to neoliberal forms of capitalism which threaten democracy. Wendy Brown (2015) emphasizes
ways neoliberal education is market driven, inherently driving out and driving away certain populations. When only certain populations can afford to send their children to college—namely the rich—then we should loudly call out this anti-democratic platform. If low and middle class families are discouraged from sending their children to college, the American citizenry will slowly become uneducated. If students are not being educated, citizens will not know enough to overthrow and fight against anti-democratic rule.

An uneducated citizenry will believe they are free simply because they are told so, and they will not question if new policies or practices threaten their freedom—because they will not know enough to do so. This is a dangerous situation. Given the fact that eventually only the wealthy classes will be able to afford higher education—if the government continues to cut funding and tuition continues to rise. Ultimately, we will have a majority of Americans who can’t see their own freedom. This type of “thinning of key democratic values coupled with the intensification of nondemocratic forces and conditions threatens to replace self-rule with a polity in which people are pawns of every kind of modern power” (Brown, 2015, p. 179). Market-driven tuition costs and reduced government aid for students are eroding the foundation of our democracy.

Conclusion

With the massive increase in college tuition over the last forty years, families are desperate to find ways to afford college, which has increased the competition for academic scholarships. Students who do not have the cultural capital, finances, test scores, or grades to get into a university are attending community college. High tuition costs and secondary school tracking are keeping lower and middle class students out of college. This alone should raise
alarms. In a democratic society, a government should encourage and assist students to attend college. The funds that were pulled back after the 1970s should be replaced. The competition to get a child into an honors or AP course—to help secure a spot in college—perpetuates the unequal sorting and sifting of students.

Those students with higher GPAs and strong essays can earn tuition assistance through an honors scholarship at community college, but this study shows how those same barriers kept students from earning a scholarship. For students who did not earn high grades in high school, or those who were placed in low and middle track classes, earning community college credit and entering the honors program is a perceived means to tuition assistance at a transfer university. We must be transparent about the likelihood that a student will earn that transfer scholarship through honors courses. Data from this study show strong evidence that students perceive honors courses in community college will lead to a scholarship. But will it?

Beyond scholarships offered at community colleges for honors students, this study also exposed other benefits of honors courses including more access to full-time faculty and increased critical thinking and dialogic inquiry in classrooms. This study reveals that students taking honors courses for the first time in community college gain self-confidence and anticipate more access to scholarships. Further research to extend this study should include a follow-up with participants to determine if they were able to obtain scholarships, and to continue to measure their self-confidence after honors enrollment. Additional extensions of this study should include students’ perceptions of their university experiences at transfer institutions.

This study also exposed ways students perceive access to professors and honors support staff, including program directors, as opportunities. Essentially, community college honors is a utopia where all students in the program are taught almost exclusively by full-time faculty who
design curricula that engages learners in dialoging, critical questioning, and independent research. Based on the success of other community college honors programs and the data from this study, it is clear that students benefit from a liberal arts curriculum. Students benefit from having a program director and learning cohort. Other learning cohorts can replicate the results of this study by ensuring students have access to more full-time faculty and on-campus staff. While community colleges appear as bargains compared to universities, costs are cut when nearly 90% of the teaching workforce is part-time—adjuncts making low-wages without benefits. If students benefit from access to professors, community colleges must hire more full-time faculty.

Previous research on tracking combined with this study show the detrimental effects of separating students in academic tracks, particularly the harm it causes low and middle track students in both their collegiate paths and self-confidence. However, due to the uproarious behavior of parents protecting honors courses at various high schools nationwide, it isn’t realistic to suggest that all schools should detrack. Bratlinger (2003) informs us that even the perceived liberal parents in the middle-class “prefer segregated and stratified schools that benefit middle-class students” (p. 59). Parents want bumper stickers that claim they have an honors student at Such and Such high school. What might happen if parents can’t put a bumper sticker on their car proclaiming their child’s honors status?

Schools should prepare parents and caregivers of middle school children to plan for college. By introducing student-specific pathways from middle school to college, parents and students will gain agency. Providing parents and students with knowledge about track placement and its impact on higher education will help alleviate the helplessness students in this study felt when they were not given the opportunity to take honors in high school. Students should not feel fated by their track placement in high school. Maxine Greene’s (1988) words ring true when
considering our responsibilities as educators: “Action signifies beginnings or the taking of initiatives; and, in education, beginnings must be thought possible if authentic learning is expected to occur” (p. 22). The results of this study prove that our students deserve less-stratified beginnings. Since students must go to school, schools must stop trapping students by social class.

We must provide students with opportunities for upward mobility to help them overcome circumstances outside of their control. We must reduce barriers to college entrance by educating families and students about track placement and remediation as early as middle school. Additionally, we must reconsider the barriers to college scholarships, particularly for community college students taking honors for the first-time. If economic hardships prohibited marginalized students from college-prep tutors, paying for college applications, or financing tuition at a university, community colleges need to help students recover from this education debt and deficit, to use Ladson-Billings’s (2006) description of one of the causes of educational inequality.

To help students recover from high school’s education deficit, community colleges should ensure marginalized students have access to financial resources to aid their academic pursuits. This means reducing barriers to community college honors scholarships. Open-access community colleges need open-access scholarships for honors courses. Furthermore, a community college designed to serve all members of the adult population should not perpetuate systems of inequality by continuing to honor students who receive the magical GPA average of 3.5 out of 4. We are doing a disservice to students when the barriers that kept them out of universities, like GPA and previous coursework, are keeping them out of a community college cohort that will help them successfully transfer to a university.
Additionally, it’s time for educators to stop repeating the same harm that has been done to them. Education is a field where evaluations and ranking systems, performance reviews and society’s judgment craft negative self-perception; it is truly a sickness that spreads from administrators to educators to students. The data show how high school educators rank students, which the researcher sees as a similar way evaluative practices determine a teacher’s success. The democratic thing to do might be an entire restructuring of how we shape minds and images in the classroom. Maybe it is time to restructure the ways educators are judged and devalued by administrators. Maybe it is time to deconstruct and rebuild the whole system? Maybe it is time to once again value education by returning money to colleges and universities to help shoulder high tuition costs, so we can remove the hunger for children to compete for scholarships.

We need to ask more questions about why only certain families can afford to send their children to college. We need to put a microscope on the policies and practices that inform how much funding the federal and state governments provide our universities. We need to remove the blindfold from politicians who overlook ways education has become market-driven so the government can reinvest in funding our universities—so students do not have to work full-time to pay their tuition at a community college.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE
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INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions

Part One

Describe your high school experience. What was your school like?

Describe how you picked your classes for high school. Who chose your classes each semester in high school?

Tell me about your experience with tracking, or classes assigned labels like “advanced,” “honors,” “regular,” or “AP.” Which courses did you take and why?

What was a typical honors or AP student like in high school? What was a typical non-honors/AP student like? What do you think explains the difference?

What barriers did you face in high school as a result of your family’s finances? What about barriers regarding race, religion, or other identities?

How did your high school classes contribute to the way you saw yourself as a student? What type of student were you in high school?

Why didn’t you take honors in high school? Why did you decide to take honors now?

Who influenced you the most when you made the decision to take honors courses? What other factors went into your decision?

What were you thinking when you first considered taking an honors class? In other words, what did you imagine your first honors class would be like?
What did you used to think about paying for college?

Were you ever worried you couldn’t go to college because you might not afford the tuition?

What is your perspective on college and a family’s finances? How does a family’s finances impact where their student goes to college?

How do you pay for college now?

Describe your experience applying for scholarships and/or grants to pay for college. How did this experience determine your college plans?

Tell me about when you were younger. Did your family struggle to pay bills? What made you aware of your family’s budget?

What financial barriers are you still facing? How has that affected your education?

Can you describe some of the college enrollment barriers you face as a result of your family’s financial background?

What about barriers regarding your race, religion, or other identities? What barriers did you face entering community college?

In college, what are the major differences between non-honors and honors classes and course content—like assignments and discussions?

If I were to follow you with a camera, to your honors courses, what would I see? In detail, can you describe the setting, including teaching, students, discussions, and assignments?
How do your identities like race, religion, or parents’ backgrounds impact your experiences with other honors students? In what ways are your identities similar to or different from other honors students’ identities?

What challenges do you face in the honors classroom?

What opportunities do honors students have? Can you describe those opportunities?

Which outside-of-class honors opportunities have you participated in? What was your experience?

If you did not take on any out-of-class honors opportunities, why not?

What does the honors distinction mean to you, and your family or friends?

What do people say when you tell them you’re in honors?

Audio and/or Video Diary Prompt

Hello. Thank you for participating in the study of community college honors students! There are three separate prompts, so you can record your responses whenever you have time. Please try to submit all responses within three weeks.

Answer the following prompts in a recorded response, either video/audio or audio only. I like the Voice Recorder app on my cell phone for audio diaries, but feel free to use what you prefer. It’s best to create three separate files to avoid those with too much bandwidth. When done, upload the file in the designated space in your Participant Folder. I look forward to hearing what you have to say!

To start: View the slides in Slideshow format to enhance clarity in font.

Prompt 1: Barriers and Tracking

Answer the following in a separate audio and/or video recording. Feel free to just talk to me in the recording.
Now that you’re in college and you picked your classes, what comes to mind when you think about your high school classes? How do you feel about the way your classes were chosen for you?

How do you think your high school classes influenced where you went to college?

What barriers did you face when applying to colleges? You might explain barriers regarding your family’s finances, race, religious background, or other obstacles.

What challenges do you currently face in attending or paying for school?

Think back to your first honors class in college. What made you register for it?

What were the requirements to registering for honors?

What did you feel like walking into an honors course for the first time? What was going through your mind?

How did you fit in with the other honors students? How did you make friends?

Did your teacher help you feel like you belonged? How?

How was the experience different than other non-honors courses?

**Prompt 2: Opportunities**

Answer the following in a separate audio and/or video recording. You might want to hit pause when you reach the question about flyers, since it directs you to a folder with images.

What kinds of benefits do you feel you are getting from honors classes?

What does it really mean when you consider your educational opportunities in honors?

Tell me about ways your family or others support you as an honors student. What types of opportunities are offered when you say you are an honors student?
What types of opportunities contribute to the way you see your college plans? Future?

Take a look at the images of flyers from honors in the Google folder labeled “Prompt 2 Flyers.”

Describe how you participated in any of the extracurricular activities in those flyers. If you didn’t participate, why not?

What about attending honors events? What was your experience like?

If you did not participate in honors events, why not?

Prompt 3: Identity

Think back to when you were in high school. What did your friends say about honors or AP students?

What did some people in high school say about classes like “low math” or “regular” versus “advanced” or “honors”? How did that shape how you saw yourself?

What types of labels did people assign to low, regular, advanced, honors, or AP classes?

Did anyone in your school associate race with a certain type of classrooms, like honors, AP, regular, or advanced?

When you were in high school, what did teachers say about honors students or non-honors students? How did that make you feel?

Now in college, what do people say when you tell them you’re in honors?

How have you evolved as a student from high school to college? What’s different about the way you see yourself?
Describe the other students in your honors classes and the friendships/working relationships you’ve formed.

How do your college professors address you as honors students? What, if anything, is different about that?

How does the honors designation make you feel about yourself?

When you think of ways the honors program will impact on your future, what comes to mind?

Table 6: Data Gathering Tools and Research Question Alignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Audio and/or Video Diaries</th>
<th>Documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ1</strong>: How do socially marginalized students entering honors courses in community college for the first time experience barriers and break through barriers, if any?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ2</strong>: What opportunities do socially marginalized students gain in community college honors courses?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RQ3</strong>: How are first-time honors students’ identities shaped by tracking?</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7: Interview Questions and Prompts Aligned with Research Questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your high school experience. What was your school like?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe how you picked your classes for high school. Who chose your classes each semester in high school?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your experience with tracking, or classes assigned labels like “advanced,” “honors,” “regular,” or “AP.” Which courses did you take and why?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was a typical honors or AP student like in high school? What was a typical non-honors/AP student like? What do you think explains the difference?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What barriers did you face in high school as a result of your family’s finances? What about barriers regarding race, religion, or other identities?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did your high school classes contribute to the way you saw yourself as a student? What type of student were you in high school?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why didn’t you take honors in high school? Why did you decide to take honors now?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who influenced you the most when you made the decision to take honors courses? What other factors went into your decision?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were you thinking when you first considered taking an honors class? In other words, what did you imagine your first honors class would be like?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you used to think about paying for college?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you ever worried you couldn’t go to college because you might not afford the tuition?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your perspective on college admissions and a family’s finances? How does a family’s finances impact where their student goes to college?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you pay for college now?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your experience applying for scholarships and/or grants to pay for college. How did this experience determine your college plans?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about when you were younger. Did your family struggle to pay bills? What made you aware of your family’s budget?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What financial barriers are you still facing? How has that affected your education?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you describe some of the college enrollment barriers you face as a result of your family’s financial background?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about barriers regarding your race, religion, or other identities? What barriers did you face entering community college?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In college, what are the major differences between non-honors and honors classes and course content—like assignments and discussions?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I were to follow you with a camera, to your honors courses, what would I see? In detail, can you describe the setting, including teaching, students, discussions, and assignments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do your identities like race, religion, or parents’ backgrounds impact your experiences with other honors students? In what ways are your identities similar to or different from other honors students’ identities?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What challenges do you face in the honors classroom?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What opportunities do honors students have? Can you describe those opportunities?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which outside-of-class honors opportunities have you participated in? What was your experience?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you did not take on any out-of-class honors opportunities, why not?</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>What does the honors distinction mean to you, your family, and friends? In other words, what do people say when you tell them you’re in honors?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now that you’re in college and you picked your classes, what comes to mind when you think about your high school classes? How do you feel about the way your classes were chosen for you?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think your high school classes influenced where you went to college?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What barriers did you face when applying to colleges? You might explain barriers regarding your family’s finances, race, religious background, or other obstacles.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What challenges do you currently face in attending or paying for school?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think back to your first honors class in college. What made you register for it?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What were the requirements to registering for honors?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you feel like walking into an honors course for the first time? What was going through your mind?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you fit in with the other honors students? How did you make friends?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did your teacher help you feel like you belonged? How?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was the experience different than other non-honors courses?</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What kinds of benefits do you feel you are getting from honors classes?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it really mean when you consider your educational opportunities in honors?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about ways your family or others support you as an honors student. What types of opportunities are offered when you say you are an honors student?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of opportunities contribute to the way you see your college plans? Future?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a look at the images of flyers from honors in the Google folder labeled “Prompt 2 Flyers.” Describe how you participated in any of the extracurricular activities in those flyers. If you didn’t participate, why not?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about attending honors events? What was your experience like?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you did not participate in honors events, why not?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think back to when you were in high school. What did your friends say about honors or AP students?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did some people in high school say about classes like “low math” or “regular” versus “advanced” or “honors”? How did that shape how you saw yourself?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What types of labels did people assign to low, regular, advanced, honors, or AP classes?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did anyone in your school associate race with a certain type of classrooms, like honors, AP, regular, or advanced?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you were in high school, what did teachers say about honors students or non-honors students? How did that make you feel?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now in college, what do people say when you tell them you’re in honors?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>How have you evolved as a student from high school to college? What’s different about the way you see yourself?</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
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<td>How do your college professors address you as honors students? What, if anything, is different about that?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>How does the honors designation make you feel about yourself?</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>When you think of ways the honors program will impact on your future, what comes to mind?</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT
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PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

Recruitment Email

Hello, honors students! As some of you know, I’m completing a doctorate in curriculum leadership at Northern Illinois University, and, to fulfill the dissertation requirements, I need to conduct a study. My area of focus is on community college students taking honors for the first time. In my research, I discovered several studies featuring faculty perspectives and those from middle and high school students; however, there is a deficit of research focusing on community college honors courses—from the perspective of students taking honors for the first time. So, I need your help to fill this research gap!

Students in the study must be: 1) taking honors for the first time this academic year (in other words, you did not take honors in high school), and 2) identify as socially marginalized (excluded from mainstream society for economic, racial, cultural, religious, or other factors).

The study includes two 20-minute interviews (face-to-face or on Zoom) and three independent audio and/or video diary recordings (five-minutes each).

The study seeks to discover the driving force behind community college students’ choice to enroll in honors and learn how first-time honors students depict their expectations and experiences.
Please respond to this email if you are able to participate. I look forward to hearing from you!

Consent Form

**Key Information**

- This is a voluntary research study on socially-marginalized community college honors students’ perspectives of their first time in honors, including past experiences with tracking.
- This five-week study involves two 20-minute interviews and three audio and or video diaries.
- The benefits include an enhanced understanding of the ways first-time honors students depict their expectations and experiences with tracking; there are no reasonably foreseeable or expected risks.

**Description of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to learn from socially-marginalized students who broke through the barriers of tracking to enter honors spaces. The study seeks to discover the driving force behind community college students’ choice to enroll in honors. In addition, the study seeks to learn how first-time honors students depict their expectations and experiences. The following questions are the catalyst for research:

1) How do socially-marginalized students entering honors courses in community college for the first time experience barriers and break through barriers, if any?

2) What opportunities do socially-marginalized students gain in community college honors courses?

3) How are first-time honors students’ identities shaped by tracking?
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Participate in two 20-minute interviews, either face-to-face or through Zoom—spaced at least one week apart. Record three prompt-driven audio and/or video diaries—over a two-week time period.

**Risks**

There are no reasonably foreseeable (or expected) risks.

**Benefits:**

Your participation is a form of activism, since you are adding to a body of knowledge about inequities in tracking. The benefits of participation include contributing to a greater understanding of the impact of tracking along with expanded knowledge on the ways college students experience honors courses for the first time. By participating, you are demonstrating the importance of gathering socially-marginalized students’ perspectives of honors courses, a population that is often overlooked and understudied in community college research.

**Confidentiality [or ANONYMITY]**

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. The researcher will be the only individual with participant identifiers. She will be the only person with access to the files. Recordings will be destroyed once the dissertation is published on Northern Illinois University’s dissertation website. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

**Your Rights**
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right to skip any question or research activity, as well as to withdraw completely from participation at any point during the process.

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered before, during, or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact the researcher, Trina Sotirakopulos, or by telephone at or the dissertation advisor, Dr. Eui-kyung Shin, at or by telephone at . If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigators or if you have any problems or concerns that occur as a result of your participation, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance, Integrity, and Safety at .

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.
I give my consent to be audio recorded (or video recorded, as appropriate) for interviews and audio and/or video diaries.

Participant’s Signature  Date

Demographics Questionnaire

Please complete this form with general demographic information. Thank you!

What is your gender identity?

*  
- Gender-fluent
- Identify as
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Don’t wish
- Other...

Describe your racial heritage. In other words, when people ask you about your race, what do you say?

*  

Long answer text

Complete the following about your parents’ education.

Some college
Other...

Roughly estimate the number of college credits you’ve completed?
*

Short answer text

How many community college honors courses have you taken so far? (List the number of classes you completed versus credit hours. Or, if you list credit hours, just indicate it below. Thanks!)

Short answer text

Thank you for this information! Feel free to jump over to the Audio and/or Video Prompt slides to start your digital diaries. -Professor Sotirakopulos