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# A View from Within: University Honors Programs and African American Women at a Predominantly White Institution

## Abstract

American higher education undergraduate honors programs are respected for the work they do to encourage college students to push themselves towards achievement in learning during their time earning an undergraduate degree. The social movements of the mid-20th century forced open the doors of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to African American students. Since that time, the number of African American students attending PWIs has increased; however, the research that focused on African American women in higher education, and more specifically honors programs, has not been a significant topic of study. The findings indicate that being the only female person of color in a classroom may not always be a negative experience. Maternal influences, educators, and a strong sense of self and self-motivation are critical to the success of these students. This hermeneutical study sought to understand lived experiences of eight African American women in a collegiate honors program. Combining hermeneutics with Black feminist thought brought to light the rich herstories of the eight participants. Major themes that surfaced in the study included a sense of freedom, self-definition, how they navigated the campus tension they experienced, and how they actualized their Black girl magic. By focusing solely on African American women, this study provides a necessary addition to understanding the unique experiences of these high-achieving individuals in a collegiate setting.

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A View from Within: University Honors Programs and African American Women at a  
Predominantly White Institution

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A Dissertation

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Janell I. Lindsey

June 2019

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at a Predominantly White Institution  
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## ABSTRACT

American higher education undergraduate honors programs are respected for the work they do to encourage college students to push themselves towards achievement in learning during their time earning an undergraduate degree. The social movements of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century forced open the doors of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to African American students. Since that time, the number of African American students attending PWIs has increased; however, the research that focused on African American women in higher education, and more specifically honors programs, has not been a significant topic of study. The findings indicate that being the only female person of color in a classroom may not always be a negative experience. Maternal influences, educators, and a strong sense of self and self-motivation are critical to the success of these students. This hermeneutical study sought to understand lived experiences of eight African American women in a collegiate honors program. Combining hermeneutics with Black feminist thought brought to light the rich herstories of the eight participants. Major themes that surfaced in the study included a sense of freedom, self-definition, how they navigated the campus tension they experienced, and how they actualized their Black girl magic. By focusing solely on African American

women, this study provides a necessary addition to understanding the unique experiences of these high-achieving individuals in a collegiate setting.

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## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION – SESA WO SUBAN

Living in the age of hashtags, such as #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackLivesMatter, must mean that the lives and experiences of African American<sup>1</sup> women are highlighted more now than ever. Unfortunately, the statement is not as true as it needs to be, especially as it concerns African American women in higher education. Even with the high-profile accomplishments that many African American women have achieved, there are hundreds more stories that need to be told, especially from African American women in collegiate honors programs. Chapter 1 is named Sesa Wo Suban which is the West African Adinkra symbol that means “change your life”. In bringing forth this research concerning African American women and collegiate honors programs, the stories that are told about the participants of this study, very well, may change lives of other Black women who not only desire but deserve the opportunities that collegiate honors programs provide.

According to the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC, 2015), 890 colleges and universities host an honors program or honors college in the United States. This is 17% of the 4,706 2-year and 4-year degree-granting institutions in the country

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<sup>1</sup> An American (esp. a North American) of African origin; a Black (Black): “designating a member of any dark-skinned group of peoples, esp. a person of sub-Saharan African origin or descent” (“African American,” 2018). In this study, the term *African American* is used interchangeably with the term *Black* to refer to a North American person of African origin.

(National Center for Education Studies [NCES], 2015). Of those 890 honors programs, little is known about their students, especially students of color and more specifically, African American women. As of mid-2012, there were 49 dissertations that designated collegiate honors programs as their subject (Holman & Banning, 2012). Of those 49, only four, or less than 1%, emphasized students of color, and none specifically researched the experiences of African American women enrolled in collegiate honors programs (Holman & Banning, 2012).

Founded in 1966, NCHC (2015), the professional association of American collegiate honors programs, indicated that 3.3%<sup>2</sup> or approximately 300,000 of 11.3 million enrolled American college students participated in a collegiate honors program. For students of color, and more specifically, African American women earning a distinction or participating in an honors program, it is believed that the numbers are even smaller (Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986; Sanon-Jules, 2010). Unfortunately, few studies have focused on the experience of African American women who have gained access to, and are benefitting from a collegiate honors program (Chaszar, 2008; Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008; Guzy, 2003; Renzulli, 1978). The study of African American women in collegiate honors programs is important to illuminate the achievement and dedication required by them to obtain a college degree and successfully satisfy the requirements of a collegiate honors program (Hammond, McBee, & Hebert, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Based on unscientific research of more than 60 American colleges and universities' honors programs.

The number of African American women entering higher education and earning their undergraduate degree in the United States continues to rise (Zamani, 2003). Despite the increase in these numbers, an understanding of the experiences and needs of African American female students is sparse (Hill Collins, 2000; Zamani, 2003). An element that may complicate researching collegiate African American women is the complex intersection of race and gender (Jackson, 1998). Without acknowledging the significance that race and gender play in the lives of African American women, many studies separate the identities and do not provide a well-rounded perspective on their experiences. If the intersection is examined, the information shared may be through the lens of a deficit point of view and is often not asset based regarding the accomplishments of African American women (Hill Collins, 2000; Jackson, 1998; Zamani, 2003). Comparing African American women to African American men and other women of color further dilutes the experiences of African American women in higher education. Race is examined but not gender or vice versa (Jackson, 1998). In contrast, this research study shows the complex nature of race, gender, and academics regarding African American women in collegiate honors programs and provides a unique view of African American female students in their quest for educational excellence.

The complex and intriguing stories of African American female participants in collegiate honors programs have been largely untold. These stories highlight the intricate negotiations African American women make each day at predominately white institutions (PWIs). These stories also recognize the intersection of race and gender that is not often discussed regarding higher education and African American women (Howard-Hamilton

& Pope, 2011). Honors programs have a unique opportunity to challenge the American educational meritocratic system to benefit students who historically have not been able to fully access the educational structure (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010).

By way of background for my study of African American women in honors programs, I begin this introductory chapter with a discussion of African American women in American higher education. I then review honors programs and their construct, and finally, I provide information on Black feminist thought (BFT), the theoretical framework utilized in this study. Next, I present the problem statement, the significance of the study, and the purpose and research questions upon which this study is built. I then provide the theoretical framework of BFT and explain how its tenets and related concepts are essentially related to my research.

In Chapter 2, I will explore the history of honors programs and how that history intersects with American higher education. The history of American honors programs and American higher education as it relates to African American women is significant, because African American women were not a population that was considered in its development. In Chapter 3, I will delve into the methodology of hermeneutics and how this method of revealing the detail of one's life provides a platform to share the experiences of the eight participants. In Chapter 4, the stories of the participants illustrate how they experienced their academic world and how they interpreted it. Even though they all have the similar experience of attending the same university, their paths to the honors program are different, and the daily experiences they encounter are individualized and singularly impactful. In Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I will discuss the findings of

the research utilizing the gathered research, and in Chapter 6, I will discuss the possibility of implications for research, theory, and practice.

Chapter's 1, 2, 3 and 6 in this dissertation has been given a special name from the West African Adinkra symbols. Adinkra symbols have been utilized for centuries in and around the Ghanaian region of Africa to visually represent the beliefs of a people (Danz y, 2009). These visual representations seek to link African American history to African history. These histories (or herstories) have and will continue to have influence on one another as African American students strive to earn an education in the United States. They serve as a reminder that their history begins long before their ancestors forced arrival in the United States. While they do not have an Adinkra name, Chapters 4 and 5 are named because of the information that is shared with them. Chapter 4 is named for the participants, The Infinite Eight and Chapter 5 is named from a poem by Ntozake Shange Sing a Black Girl's Song. These two chapters stand differently from the others as they bring together the other chapters in sharing the rich stories of the participants in this study. The list of Adinkra symbols and their meanings used in this dissertation can be seen in Appendix K.

### **Background of the Study**

Despite being purposely excluded from the American higher educational system, African American women have found their way to educational success. That educational success, while significant, was not easy to come by. From the early emergence of African American women attending American colleges and universities, they consistently negotiated acceptance and sought to not only find their voice but also ensure it be heard,

contributing to the academy and negotiating contracts regarding education and American society within which they were never invited to participate (Evans, 2007). Excluding the voices of Black women's experiences in higher education diminishes their significance and the importance of how these experiences have changed American higher education (Evans, 2007).

The changes in American higher education are significant to note, because these changes are what have allowed higher education to open its doors to a more diverse student body. Some may argue that the doors were not willingly opened but were forced open, both physically and legally (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991). Whereas the doors of higher education may have been forced open, the disparity in support and educational attainment concerning Black women has not decreased as significantly as it has for other groups of college-going Americans (Evans, 2007). This disparity furthers the belief that the experiences of these individuals are not as valued as others within academe (Allen et al., 1991; Evans, 2007). The increased value placed upon a historically marginalized group within American higher education may indicate this complex educational system is beginning to right itself to protect and nurture future generations of Black female students (Banks, 2009). However, that righting is not as inclusive as it needs to be without the voices of these individuals.

The reality of higher education as it relates to the experiences of African American women is that the higher educational space was not created for them. It was created for White, upper class men (Allen et al., 1991; Banks, 2009; Evans, 2007). As higher education has worked to modify and adjust its structure to allow for a more

diverse student body, its pedagogy, social structure, and faculty structure remain largely unchanged (Allen et al., 1991; Evans, 2007). Although the door to access has opened, African American women continue to negotiate academic terrain that may continue to be hostile towards them, especially if they find themselves being the only person of color in spaces at predominantly white universities (Banks, 2009). In many cultures, especially the African American culture, education is seen as a means to economic freedom and a way to achieve economic and social equality (Banks, 2009; Evans, 2007). Taking this statement a step further to indicate that education is an equalizer sheds a different light on American higher education (Banks, 2009). It indicates that education brings equality, whereas in reality, the process of achieving a college degree does not necessarily bring equality, and it may further separate those with means versus those without means (Banks, 2009).

### **Problem Statement**

American higher education was established to educate White men, which did not include White women (Thelin, 2011). As American higher education continued to develop and women began to attend college, American colleges and universities worked to address the needs of women and then eventually women of color (including African American women) (Allen et al., 1991). Even though the institutions have begun to address the needs of a diverse student body, gaps remain in how students are supported and educated (Allen et a., 1991; Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006; Thelin 2011). Fundamentally, honors programs were designed to help all students, not just an elite few. However, in practice, neither American higher education nor honors programs were



developed to educate all those who sought to achieve an education (Allen et al., 1991).

The reality that a limited number of African American students are able to access American higher education, and then only a certain percentage of those students are able to access honors programs, assisted in the label being placed on honors programs as elite (Rinn & Cobane, 2009). Regarding the issue of access and honors programs, Chaszar (2008) commented,

The selection process in American higher education is primarily meritocratic, and this principle is the focus of a debate that involves issues such as the definition of talent and ability, their measurability, and the consequences of those definitions and measures on the outcomes of the selection process. (p. 4)

America's meritocratic system has contributed to the exclusion of many students, in particular, students of color, who deserve an inclusive educational experience rather than an exclusive one. Legal barriers, such as Separate but Equal legislation (1896-1954) and Jim Crow laws (1830-1965), contributed to the narrowing of opportunities for African Americans in American society (Allen et al., 1991). Such limited opportunities are directly linked to the small numbers of African Americans in gifted and talented education in K-12, which may then correlate to the small number of African American women in collegiate honors programs (Ford, 1998). The limited access to gifted and talented programs in secondary education for African American girls is concerning, because talent will continue to be untapped, and the opportunities and freedom that accompany an honors education will not be actualized (Ford & King, 2014).

In 1976, only 9.6% of eligible African Americans earned a college education. More recently (2015), statistics reflected 14.9% of African Americans were earning a 4-year college degree, a 5.3% increase almost 40 years later (NCES, 2015). Regarding

gender, an examination of similar data from 2012 revealed 16.6% of African American women were earning a college degree compared to 12.7% of African American men (NCES, 2015). With respect to enrollment in undergraduate honors programs, Sanon-Jules (2010) observed,

While the number of African American students entering college has increased, the number of African American students in collegiate undergraduate honors programs has not risen as quickly. Currently, the proportion of African American students in honors programs is significantly smaller than their numbers in colleges. (p. 101)

One reason the numbers may not be increasing as quickly is that African American female students are underrepresented in K-12 gifted and talented programs in the United States (Ford, 1989, 1995; Ford et al., 2008). The path for African American females into the honors education system is a difficult one because more African American students are labeled as special needs compared to being labeled high achieving or gifted (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010; Ford, 1989, 1995; Ford et al., 2008). Research showed that in 2000, “African American youth, ages 6 through 21, account for 14.8% of the general population. Yet, they account for 20.2% of the special education population” (Lawson, Humphrey, Wood-Garnett, Fearn, Welch, Green-Bryant & Avoke, 2002, p. 5). If African American students are educated through special education courses, they may never regain access to mainstream education (Lawson et al., 2002). According to Maholmes and Brown (2002), African American students may be improperly assigned as special needs due to deficit model assessments and a lack of clear and culturally sensitive educational assessment methods. These nonobjective methods continue to narrow opportunities for African American students to receive the educational and intellectual

challenge or support they deserve, and they also may aid in marginalizing the intellect of African American youth (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). Hence, this overrepresentation of African American students in special education, as stated earlier, may correlate to the lower number of African American women in collegiate honors programs (Ford, 1989, 1995).

Overall, the sparse literature that does exist concerning African American women in college largely has discussed their experience from a deficit point of view. To reiterate, Harrison-Cook (1999) found that African Americans, both male and female, comprised fewer than 2% of the student population at the 25 predominantly white NCHC honors programs she researched. The realization that the number of African American women in these programs is even fewer provides the catalyst for this research.

### **Significance of the Study**

African American women currently enrolled in honors programs may be fortunate not to have been hampered by some of the well-documented educational barriers, such as being relegated as special needs; performance on standardized tests; lack of financial resources; or the zip code where they live, which may indicate they do not have access to a quality education (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010; Sanon-Jules, 2010). However, due to lack of research on this population of students, this has not been proven. Regardless of how these African American women gained access into their collegiate honors program, understanding their experience is essential for young African American women who are and will be entering the American educational pipeline, and subsequently, collegiate honors programs (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). It is significant that this

dissertation's contribution to the literature of the lived experiences of successful African American women in the American higher education system, and more specifically in honors programs, challenges deficit-model thinking that students of color are academically limited. Moreover, this dissertation offers important implications for how institutions can build better support systems for African American women in honors programs.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this dissertation is to illuminate the rich lived experiences of African American women enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program through a qualitative phenomenological research study. The guiding research questions are as follows:

1. What are the academic paths experienced by African American women that have prepared them for entrance and success within a collegiate honors program?
2. What are the lived experiences of African American women who currently are or recently have been enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework chosen for this dissertation is Black feminist thought (BFT), developed by Hill Collins (1989). Hill Collins defined BFT as “a self-defined standpoint on [African American women's] own oppression” (p. 747). Through defining BFT, Hill Collins unpacks the intricacies of the experience of African American females to describe how their lived experience is different from that of others who are not Black

and female. Not only do African American women experience the world differently, their interpretation of what occurs around them is also different (Hill Collins, 1989). BFT provides a lens to illuminate how African American women in collegiate honors programs benefit from the educational environment of honors programs. Regardless of the lack of equity within American higher education, there are African American women thriving in higher education and within honors programs, and their stories may greatly assist in determining how colleges and universities recognize the academic achievements of other African American women in honors programs. Moreover, these stories help in building a stronger avenue for other African American women to access honors programs.

In the early 1990s, the United States experienced significant change, both socially and internationally. A few historical examples from 1991 include the following events: the Gulf War ended, the Rodney King tape was released and the officers accused of beating him were tried and subsequently acquitted, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshal announced his retirement, the terminology *World Wide Web* was introduced, the Soviet Union was collapsing (*The People History*, 2015), and Hill Collins (1991) wrote the first edition of her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. In developing BFT, Hill Collins (2000) called upon the works of Alice Walker, bell hooks, and Maria W. Stewart (to name a few) to support her research in naming the phenomenon of the shared experiences of African American women.

BFT provides a platform where African American women, through their own voice and lens, have the power to share common experiences, place explanation to those experiences, and name them (Taylor, 1998). Feminism, although important, did not include the voices of African American women in its development and thus further silenced the voices of African American women (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Taylor, 1998). As African American women continued to recognize how feminism not only supported racism and sexism but elevated these constructs, they saw the need to tell their own stories (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Taylor, 1998). The six tenets of BFT set forth by Hill Collins (2000) are described as follows:

1. Empowerment: “Black feminist thought aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p. 22). One must be empowered in order to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it;
2. Tension: Tension emerges from linking experiences and ideas. “Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this [does not mean] that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences” (p. 25);
3. Connections: This tenet refers to “the connections between U.S. Black women’s experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint” (p. 29). These connections are essential to ensure that self-definition becomes the narrative of the oppressed.

4. Intellectualism: This tenet recognizes the essential contributions of African-American women intellectuals. For example,  

“One key task for Black women intellectuals of diverse ages, social classes, educational backgrounds, and occupations consists of asking the right questions and investigating all dimensions of a Black woman’s standpoint with and for African-American women” (p. 33);
5. Change: This tenet stipulates that “in order for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic” (p. 30);
6. Social justice: This reflects the reality that “a broad range of African-American women’s struggles are part of a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice” (p. 41).

Individually, the tenets are significant; yet when taken together, they create a powerful tool to utilize when discussing experiences of individuals in areas where research is in need of contributions.

Hill Collins (2000) also synthesized the essence of the tenets in the following five concepts that encompass these tenets and provide more focus on the experiences of African American women: (a) outsider-within, (b) intellectual activism, (c) matrix of domination, (d) controlling images, and (e) self-definition. Within the theory of BFT, it is suggested in this study that these five concepts represent the feelings of African American women as they navigate their collegiate honors program experience. These five concepts are briefly discussed below in relation to this dissertation:

- *Outsider-within*. African American women have often been witness to American culture and history because of their role within the white household

as a domestic employee, for example. Often ignored by their employers, African American women were outsiders within spaces where they were welcome only as domestic workers (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Hill Collins, 1986 & 2000; Taylor, 1998). African American women in honors programs are often the “only”—the outsider—not just within their honors courses, but also in other courses, especially at a PWI. This experience may also cause them to be marginalized and feel that they are not supposed to be in their honors program (Scott, 2017).

- *Intellectual activism.* In 2017, Representative Maxine Waters proclaimed she was “reclaiming her time,” (Romano, 2017) and intellectual activism is Hill Collins’s call to African American women to reclaim their traditions and activism. Historically having been part of centuries of repression, today’s African American women have the opportunity to eliminate the gap between the past and future of their intellectual thinking and writing (Hill Collins, 2000).
- *Matrix of domination.* The intersecting oppressive forces—race, gender, and socioeconomic status—create a matrix where domination develops its own method to organize the oppression. Laws may be created to contain individuals—Jim Crow laws, institutionalized racism to keep individuals from progressing, and development of imagery to create doubt and fear, such as Little Black Sambo (Hill Collins, 2000; Taylor, 1998). Similar to American higher education institutions, honors programs may have contributed to the



matrix of domination. It is through BFT that such matrices can be examined and dismantled. 27

- *Controlling images.* Similar to the matrix of domination, controlling images continue the stereotype that African American women are lazy and hyper-sexualized and need only be domestic servants (to name a few stereotypes). “Un-normalizing” the imagery by African American women serves to place the voice with them, not their oppressor (Hill Collins, 2000; Taylor, 1998). The image of the underachieving African American student may be dismantled through the current images of African American women succeeding in education and in life. Controlling images will show an asset model of success versus the deficit model of despair and limited opportunities.
- *Self-definition.* As it states, self-definition is just that: African American women defining themselves and not being allowed to be defined by others. This is an integral part of many people’s journey, especially that of African American women, as they become comfortable with the intersection of gender and race. The African American women that are intellectual and educational pioneers in collegiate honors program are rewriting their definition in a positive and powerful way.

In support of the dissertation’s goal of seeking to become aware of the experiences of African American women in undergraduate collegiate honors programs, the six tenets and five concepts bring life and meaning to the stories of African American women within American higher education. The following quote resonates with the study

of the collegiate honors programs: “The shadow obscuring the Black women’s intellectual tradition is neither accidental nor benign” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 3). That is, the suppression by the dominant group has been designed specifically to silence African American women and ensure their invisibility (Hill Collins, 2000). For African American women, recognition of the oppression/suppression is a political act, and as this recognition continues, intellectual work becomes heightened and perhaps more salient to those doing the work (Hill Collins, 2000). The intellectual work that African American women accomplish within collegiate honors programs deserves attention. Such attention needs to be focused on the experience these women have within the programs in relation to their colleges and universities and how that environment assists in nurturing their intellect. These programs may be ensuring that the voices and experiences of gifted African American women are no longer silenced, which is an exciting prospect.

Focusing on African American women and their educational experience, BFT provides the framework for showing the progression of these individuals from survival to thriving within American higher education. As Hill Collins (2000) explained, “Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined” (p. 4). Their continued success is vital for those seeking to change not only their own economic status but also the trajectory of their lives and the lives of those around them (Hill Collins, 2000). Much of the literature regarding Black feminism and BFT has referred to the women as coping and dealing with double oppression or racism and does not fully expand to where the women succeed despite their circumstance. For this

dissertation, BFT offers a lens to view the academic success of these women through a theoretical framework that was developed by African American women for African American women.

BFT not only assists in illuminating the life path that African American women may take to enter a collegiate honors program but also helps reveal the inner thoughts—self-motivation—that many of these women utilize to successfully realize their academic achievements. Thus, BFT brings understanding of a life's path (Hill Collins, 2000; Taylor, 1998), and for this dissertation, that of African American women in collegiate honors programs.

To accomplish this understanding, individual interviews were conducted to gather data about women who currently are or recently have been part of a collegiate undergraduate honors program. As an African American administrator in higher education with over 20 years of experience, I am driven by my curiosity of how African American women navigate their higher educational experience, especially as they embrace their academic hunger by participating in an undergraduate honors program.

Most women have multiple roles that they navigate every moment of the day; this is especially true for African American women who seek their undergraduate degrees in American higher education institutions (Hill Collins, 1989; hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Relevant to this study, the word *role* is defined in two ways: “a person's allotted share, part or duty in life and society; [and the] the character, place, or status assigned to or assumed by a person” (Role, n.d.). Referring to their daily roles, African American women encompass both definitions as they lead their lives. Examples

of roles that the African American woman embodies may include serving as a mother in the Black church, being protector and sole caretaker for children and family, being a representative of the “sandwich generation” by taking care of her children and aging parents or extended family members, being a leader at her place of employment, and perhaps being the “educated one” in her family. The significance of these roles is for one to understand the complexity of a person and how she may experience the world and how the world may experience her (Hill Collins, 2000).

This dissertation’s use of a theoretical framework created by African American women, expressly developed to show the varied experiences of African American women in the United States, may be criticized as being limited in scope; however, it is not. Research protocol requires researchers to limit and narrow the topic to focus and concentrate on one element of a larger topic so that its parts can be further understood. This is what BFT has done with and for the stories of African American women in collegiate undergraduate honors programs.

### **Conclusion**

African American women are often “superinvisible” (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007) because they are not recognized for their significant academic accomplishments. This superinvisibility has caused a gap in the understanding of the academic experiences of African American women. To assist in closing that gap, this research, in conjunction with BFT, seeks to uncover the rich experiences of African American women within one collegiate honors program. Additionally, this research ensures that African American

women's identity of race and gender are not separated but rather carefully examined to describe the whole experience of these women in collegiate honors programs.

## CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW -

### NEA ONNIM NO SUA A, OHU

The key areas of literature that inform this research include (a) the history of American honors education, (b) honors program structure (c) honors program best practices, and (d) African American women in American higher education. A review of honors program structure provides the context for addressing the questions, and a discussion of honors program best practices emphasizes the focus of this literature view. To further understand the impact of honors programs this literature review will also examine concepts such as oppression and identity of African American women in American higher education. The Adinkra symbol for Chapter 2 is named Nea Onnim No Sua A, Ohu, which means knowledge and life-long education (Danzy. 2009). This symbol was chosen to represent how educators must continually review the literature to inform how students are supported. Without understanding the literature in how and why programs and procedures were developed to know their pros and cons, educators cannot fully develop new programs and procedures to support students (Allen et al., 2009). The guiding research questions in this dissertation are as follows:

1. What are the academic paths experienced by African American women that have prepared them for entrance and success within a collegiate honors program?

2. What are the lived experiences of African American women who currently are or recently have been enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program?

### **History of Honors Education**

The first significant texts regarding American honors programs were published in the 20<sup>th</sup> century between 1925 and 1966. Three texts, *Honors Courses in American Colleges and Universities* by Aydelotte (1925), *Breaking the Academic Lock Step* by Aydelotte (1944), and *The Superior Student in American Higher Education* by Cohen (1966), began to formally outline the fundamental principles honors programs needed to develop. In the 1920s, Aydelotte sought to change how composition was taught, based on his experiences teaching composition at Harvard University (Guzy, 2003). Aydelotte saw that he could not teach all students in his class the same way, because students had different wants and abilities regarding their education (Guzy, 2003). This experience showed him that some students needed and wanted a more challenging curriculum (Guzy, 2003). Based on this experience at Harvard, coupled with becoming president of Swathmore College, Aydelotte developed one of the first American honors programs. Swathmore's program ensured students not only received additional work and guidance but also were taught to apply those thoughts through focused instruction by the faculty. This approach to teaching and teaching honors students greatly influenced the opportunity for American higher education to assist in developing students who further contributed to America's democratic society (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). By creating an educational track for high-ability students, Aydelotte (1925) provided an advanced academic path for students who needed and sought more academic rigor.

Aydelotte's honors program development was well received throughout the higher education community, even though its curricular structure was specifically designed for America's private colleges and universities (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). Aydelotte developed a systematic academic path for students to become an honors student. One of the main components of that path was for students not to rush through the bachelor's degree process (Aydelotte, 1944; Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). This slower approach to an undergraduate degree enabled students to absorb and utilize the information versus regurgitating information. For example, Aydelotte's structure focused on honors being an important part of the second half of a college education instead of the first half. The first 2 years of instruction prepared students for the specialized work that was to come after the completion of core curriculum (Guzy, 2003). This also enabled students who exhibited significant academic abilities and who needed the increased academic rigor to enter the more rigorous curriculum of honors versus having all students on a similar path. Aydelotte (1944) referred to this as the "academic lock step" (p. 12).

The phrase, academic lock step, is defined as the "gap between students with significant academic abilities versus those who have not achieved a certain level of academic abilities" (Guzy, 2003, p. 6). One of the most significant issues Aydelotte emphasized about the academic lock step was that traditional education left honors students unchallenged, and this was a disservice to them. Aydelotte, provided this explanation:

But once the plan of study is determined it is obvious that each individual should be required to come up to the highest standard of excellence of which he is



capable. This can never be the case if individuals of all levels of ability are taught in the same classes and set the same examinations. That is the common practice. It constitutes a kind of academic lock step, bad for the poorest and wasteful for the best. We must eliminate that waste if we are to have a liberal training adequate to the needs of the post-war world. While seeing to it that individuals of each level of ability have the training best suited to them, we must realize that the future of our country depends on what happens to the best. It is from the ablest young men and women, given the proper training, that we may hope for the leadership without which democracy cannot survive. (Aydelotte, 1944, p. 10)

Although the academic lock step focused solely upon the aptitude of students within the classroom, America continued to separate students based upon the separate but equal ideology, which legally separated students by their race and color (Allen et.al, 1991). This separation assisted in further pushing students of color away from honors and toward an education that may not have provided enough stimulation as their White counterparts experienced (Ford et al., 2008).

Joseph Cohen from the University of Colorado Boulder is credited with continuing to move American honors programs forward, especially during critical times in American history, such as World War II (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). Despite budgetary reductions and declining enrollment during WWII (1939-1945) with many students leaving to fight the war, Cohen was able to maintain the honors program at the University of Colorado at Boulder (Guzy, 2003). This allowed him to continue to push for colleges and universities to support honors education despite the country's attention on the war. *The Superior Student in American Higher Education*, written by Cohen (1966), began to address the needs of honors programs at public higher education institutions (Guzy, 2003). Cohen is also credited with the resurgence and refocus of honors programs by founding the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student in

1966, which that same year became the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), continuing to the present to serve as the national organization for American honors programs (Chaszar, 2008).

As America emerged from WWII and entered the Cold War era (1947-1991), Cohen continued to expand the academic work of honors programs. One of his major contributions was assisting the United States in producing students who would enhance America's increasing support of higher education because of the Cold War and America's competition with Russia (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). By expanding Aydelotte's honors program structure, Cohen (1966) increased the reach of honors programs by showing how the entire campus community benefitted from honors education. He ensured that honors had a wider effect on all students by encouraging institutions to allow students to take honors classes that were specifically not in their major (Cohen, 1966). Additionally, Cohen recommended embedding honors throughout a university versus having a stand-alone program that was only accessible to a few students. His efforts assisted in shedding the stigma of elitism, which often plagued honors programs (Guzy, 2003). Cohen saw honors programs as a nucleus of change in higher education and a call for higher standards across the board (Guzy, 2003).

American higher education has long been charged with assisting in addressing the intellectual needs of its citizens (Chaszar, 2008). In times of significant international competition, honors programs have been specifically tasked with producing minds to ensure America's world competitiveness (Passow, 1979). For example, during the early 1950s, America was always first in developing technology, gadgets, and science, and its

citizens believed the country was superior to the rest of the world (Passow, 1979). It was not until 1957 with the release of Sputnik that America's quest to always be first was severely challenged by its Cold War enemy, Russia (Passow, 1979). Such world technological advancements as the invention and launch of Sputnik from Russia startled the United States, forcing the U.S. government to rethink its position as a world power and whether it was still a world power and not Russia (Passow, 1979). Instead of the U.S. leaders offering sound solutions to address the threat by Russia, rhetoric focused on education and how education was not producing the minds needed to continue its international dominance (Passow, 1979). Thus, in rethinking its world position, the U.S. government specifically tasked higher education, and more specifically honors programs, to keep America competitive (Passow, 1979). Eventually, the academic community took action and began garnering the academic and financial support it needed to elevate honors education, especially in science and technology (Passow, 1979).

Another reason the government needed to reach out to higher education was the developing anti-intellectualism sentiment in the country, which was prevalent in the 1950s (Chaszar, 2008). It has been argued that during times of anti-intellectualism, the most gifted students suffer, and intelligence, in general, is diminished or lost because it is not nurtured (Chaszar, 2008; Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). Supporting intellectual growth and countering anti-intellectualism are influenced by the needs and leadership of the sitting United States president (Chaszar, 2008). Thus, anti-intellectualism was challenged during John F. Kennedy's presidential administration

(1961-1963), because Kennedy surrounded himself with strong intellectual advisors (Chaszar, 2008).

### **Evolution of Honors Programs**

Similar to American higher education, honors programs were developed to create a pathway to higher education only for those who were able to access it, or in other words, for those who had the proper racial, cultural, and economic privilege (Allen et al., 1991). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Industrial Revolution and world wars were responsible for the employing of much of the country due to the need for manufactured goods, and most of these types of labor jobs did not require a college education (Thelin, 2011). Those privileged enough to be enrolled at a college or university received a personalized educational experience, and professors carefully constructed curriculum and knowledge to ensure students understood the material as comprehensively as possible (Aydelotte, 1944; Cohen, 1966; Guzy, 2003; Thelin, 2011). For example, with fewer than 1,000 enrolled students in the 1920s, Boulder's student population and number of professors resembled those of the private institutions (University of Colorado at Boulder, 2013). As American colleges and universities evolved in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this type of one-on-one intense education was modified to educate the increasing numbers of new and diverse students (Passow, 1979). This was particularly important for public colleges and universities, because they saw their postwar enrollments soar. As mentioned earlier, the University of Colorado at Boulder was an innovative public institution in how it developed its honors programs, mainly because of the work of Joseph Cohen and the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student

(Chaszar, 2008). The work that Cohen did with Boulder set the foundation for other public/state institutions to create and support honors programs (Chaszar, 2008).

Although public institutions had the ability to create honors programs, earlier Aydelotte (1944) questioned whether state institutions had the means to fully develop honors programs because of their more liberal admissions practices as compared to private institutions. He explained,

In the state universities, and in some other institutions as well, the task of providing special facilities for students of higher than average ability is made at once more urgent and more difficult because of the presence of a considerable body of students whose ability to do university work is distinctly below the average. (p. 90)

Despite doubt from Aydelotte, state institutions have shown that they are very capable of hosting honors programs (Chaszar, 2008), a current example being Michigan State University (MSU) in East Lansing. As one of the oldest honors colleges at a public university, the Michigan State Honors College has been in existence since 1957. Since that time, MSU has become a pioneer for public universities in creating unique and academically rewarding experiences for students. One cornerstone of the MSU honors program is that many requirements/prerequisites or courses designated for juniors and seniors are waived. This enables their students to focus on research and more quickly advance in their major. This element is important because it provides students freedom to explore and not be held to the traditional path for achieving an undergraduate degree (Michigan State University (MSU), 2017). MSU honors students also have the flexibility to enroll in graduate-level courses to fulfill honors program requirements, which include honors-caliber courses that are specifically selected to academically and intellectually

challenge students (MSU, 2017). This type of academic freedom enables the students and the professors to craft curriculum to fully engage honors students academically. This is one type of academic benefit that is typically offered only to honors program students.

### **Elitism**

Honors programs have long fought the label of being elite<sup>3</sup> and the stigma that comes with that label (Guzy, 2003; Weiner, 2009). Elitism as it applies to honors programs has been strongly debated because some argue that only students with certain qualities can access honors programs, for example, those from high socioeconomic backgrounds, non-first generation students, and students who are not racially or ethnically diverse (Rinn & Cobane, 2009).

As honors programs have continued to develop, they grapple with modern thoughts of elitism, more specifically concerning the socioeconomic status of their students (Weiner, 2009). Most honors programs do not see themselves different than other programs that support and educate a certain population of students, for example, first-generation students or those who need additional academic support (Guzy, 2003; Weiner, 2009). Nevertheless, the limited number of students of color in an honors program may lead these students to feelings of isolation and the questioning of whether they belong in the program (Allen et al., 1991; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Duncan, Wells & Crain, 1997; Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011).

The need and awareness for diversity in American higher education became a strong movement in the 1970s and further illuminated the benefits that students of color

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<sup>3</sup> Referring to the best of a class or group, and as it relates to this study, the highest-achieving students who stand apart from the rest.

brought to PWIs (Brazziel, 1970; Brooks, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2000). This awareness led PWIs to actively recruit high-attaining African American students to their institutions (Adams, 1990; Mitchell, 2002). Even though these students were recruited for their academic achievements, they were not necessarily recruited into honors programs, which would further develop their intellectual talent (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

Articles that critically examine some of the practices of honors programs, such as elitism, may not fully address the scope of the impact of being elitist or assist the programs in moving toward solutions that may best serve the students and the programs (Ashton, 2009). In the article, “Honors Needs Diversity More Than the Diverse Need Honors,” Ashton (2009) discussed how he empowered his New York City-raised students to utilize their honors program to benefit them and not succumb to the belief held by others that they might not belong in an honors program. He also discussed how honors may “cost” students of color more than their Caucasian counterparts because of such students’ need to work a part-time job or concentrate on their GPA to ensure access into graduate school. In the last sentence of his article, Ashton stated, “I cannot offer a solution to this dilemma, but awareness of it may help us design and maintain better honors programs” (p. 67). Other articles that have discussed elitism defend honors programs and do not offer changes to a system that is not as inclusive as it could be in today’s postsecondary environment.

African American students who choose to be part of an honors program may often find that they are the only student of color in their program (Harrison-Cook, 1999). The dynamic of being the only student of color in an honors classroom may cause African

American students to question their racial and ethnic history and explore their heritage within and outside the classroom (Harrison-Cook, 1999). Even though they may be the only students of color, savvy African American millennial college students of today are well aware of their “only” status and of not being placed in a box that prescribes how African American students must be (Scott, 2017). Although “standing out” may be difficult, today’s college students understand and embrace their only status. By their embracing their status, whether they realize it or not, they are changing the culture of the honors program and the colleges and universities where they attend (Scott, 2017). In essence, they are reestablishing the way racism and inequities are confronted and dismantled within higher education. The significant difference in fighting racism now versus the 1960s is that during the 1960s, racism was not only overt, it was also legal, and in the new millennium, it is more covert (Scott, 2017). This covert racism crosses cultural, social, and economic barriers (Scott, 2017). These barriers directly correlate to democracy and how education has been constructed and maintained in America (Scott, 2017).

### **Honors Program Structure**

As colleges and universities were growing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and modifying much of their entire structure, honors programs have largely stayed true to their original missions. The types of honors programs include all-university programs, honors colleges, departmental honors programs, honors courses, or arrangements where students can take non-honors-designated courses for honors credit (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). All-university honors programs provide an opportunity for students to experience a broad



range of honors opportunities from across the campus and not solely the arts and sciences disciplines where honors programs first began (Chaszar, 2008). The creation of honors colleges provided an opportunity for faculty to gain more control over program and graduation requirements that may be separate from other institutional requirements (Chaszar, 2008). Departmental honors are administered through individual academic departments and are usually geared towards upper-level courses (Chaszar, 2008). Regarding honors courses or non-honors courses that students may be able to take for credit, these may be available for students who are seeking an honors experience outside of their major (Chaszar, 2008). If an institution has none of these official offerings, professors may work with students to extend their learning by assigning additional components to their class work (Chaszar, 2008). Ivy League institutions, such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and other highly selective private institutions, do not typically offer honors programs as they believe and treat all their students as honors students (Guzy, 2003; Weiner, 2009). Treating all students as honors students would be ideal, as one thinks about American higher education and how differently students are educated and treated within the American educational system. However, when considering the lack of equity within American higher education, the realization is that students of color have not been able to access these highly selective institutions nor honors programs at a high rate, and therefore, they may not receive the same type of education that their White peers have received (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Regardless of the issue of access, the values that have been embedded within American higher education and honors programs may not always align with the values of communities of color (Davis, 2018). This

misalignment may also contribute to the low numbers of students of color being enrolled in these programs (Davis, 2018).

An all-university honors college or honors program may be housed at a large public or private higher education institution where the program is well funded and fully integrated throughout the institution (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). This may be the most advantageous of the types of honors programs, because the professors and students have the opportunity to focus on particular subjects (Cohen, 1966). For example, all-university programs may have the privilege of supporting individual honors programs within a particular department or school. With a general honors program, students from disciplines across the institution come together to share knowledge (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003).

The variety of educational elements within honors programs ensures that the institution and the student have the freedom to develop the best course of individualized honors education (Aydelotte, 1944). The diversity of education in these programs is specifically designed to solicit the highest level of academic performance from their students, as Aydelotte (1944) intended. Regardless of what type of honors program an institution may host, the common thread among all of them is “an elite notion that the brightest students will benefit from a curricular program different from that available to the average college student” (Haarlow, 2003, p. 12).

During the inception of American honors programs, honors faculty believed that certain students were bored and not challenged in a traditional classroom setting (Aydelotte, 1944; Guzy, 2003). Inaugural honors program structures were designed to

offer honors students a more robust education that afforded them the ability of not only learning material but also seeing that material in action (Cohen, 1966; Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). Honors faculty do not see themselves as limited by their classroom; they take their classroom wherever they go (Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). For example, non-honors professors may teach about war; however, honors professors have the freedom to expand that topic by teaching specifically about the Vietnam War's impact on America and perhaps further researching how it impacted the community where the institution is located (Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). This is one small example of how honors program curriculum expands the thinking of and exposure to a particular topic with students.

The emphasis on developing a one-on-one relationship between the professor and student within collegiate honors programs can be traced back to Aydelotte, Cohen, and the other honors program founders (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 203). Their focus was to ensure students had the guidance they needed to be both challenged and educated at the same time. Consequently, honors programs also provide students the freedom to explore beyond what is on the page, in conjunction with the guidance of their professor (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 203). Students who are not a part of honors programs may have the similar freedom to explore new avenues; however, they must do so on their own (Friedman & Jenkins-Friedman, 1986). College and university courses that are adapted for both honors and non-honors courses ultimately benefit all students (Bell, 2008; Clauss, 2011). Moreover, courses that are more interdisciplinary in nature may offer all types of students a different way to problem solve and learn (Chaszar, 2008). The differences between an

honors and a non-honors undergraduate course are that honors program students are given a large amount of independent work, they are expected to seek out original sources, and their work may be published at the end of the term (Chaszar, 2008).

As colleges and universities have grown to accommodate the increasing number of students, which has resulted in large class sizes in the traditional higher education models, the needs of the individual student have often been ignored to educate the large number of enrolled students (Aydelotte, 1944; Chaszar, 2008). It is increasingly difficult for students not enrolled in an honors program to receive the type of close interaction honors programs provide. Thus, in a society where hundreds of college students may be educated together in one classroom, honors programs have had the privilege to provide students the individual attention they deserve (Clauss, 2011).

Few honors programs are capable of completely educating their students apart from the non-honors students (nor would they want to), because honors curriculum is designed to complement non-honors curriculum (Clauss, 2011). For example, most honors program students only take 25% of their classes through honors, thus most of their classes are outside of honors (Clauss, 2011; Dennison, 2008). The benefit of having all types of academic abilities in classes is that it “raises the intellectual stakes for all students” (Clauss, 2011, p. 95). The ability of colleges and universities to well educate all their students is essential to the success of all types of curricula, including honors and other academic programs (Dennison, 2008). This success can be seen in an institution’s ability to attract many students of all types and for those students to succeed once they have earned their collegiate credentials (Clauss, 2011; Dennison, 2008). As Clauss (2011)

discussed, the intellectual stakes are high for colleges and universities to ensure that they can educate America.

### **Development of the National Collegiate Honors Council**

In 1966, Joseph Cohen, with the assistance of the Inter-University Committee on the Superior Student (which he co-founded), developed 16 points that assisted in lending guidance to honors programs and provided continuity within the programs (Guzy, 2003). As mentioned earlier, that same year, this committee became the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC), serving to the present time as the national organization for American honors programs. Most if not all collegiate honors programs follow the expectations set forth by the NCHC. Accepted originally in 1994, amended in 2007, and further amended in 2010, the NCHC (2012) set forth 17 points that must be included for a fully developed honors program (see Appendix A). These points have largely remained unchanged since Cohen developed them in the 1960s (see Appendix B). The NCHC's 17 expectations range from the reporting lines of the programs to ways of ensuring that not only the students provide input within the programs but also the programs incorporate that input. The NCHC guidelines afford programs the framework and support to exist within a changing higher education environment, thereby allowing them to be a collective force within higher education.

The NCHC (2012) also provides guidance on course design. One of the core elements of the course design is crafted to ensure students are provided ample time to master the academic tasks they are given. Honors courses have lower enrollment to offer students the opportunity to delve deeply into the course material, complemented by the

involvement of the professor. NCHC also provides guidance regarding what it considers the optimal atmosphere of the classroom to encourage and support the best environment for discussion and allow students to be successful. For example, in the article, “What Is an Honors Student?” Achterberg (2005) questioned both the aesthetic of what is believed is an honors student as well as the way students are taught. Sederberg (2005) suggested that the program structure offers high-achieving students the space to not only use their talents but also feel comfortable in their surroundings (Guzy, 2003). Bell (2008) discussed developing a community of scholars both inside and outside the classroom to better surround the students with an honors perspective. Although the 17 points have remained largely unchanged since their inception, honors program professionals continue to push honors programs and the NCHC forward.

### **Honors Student Learning**

Aydelotte (1944) sought to challenge the status quo of educating students in a mass format that was not equitable in educating all types of academically diverse students. He worked to challenge higher education to break the academic lock step and develop educational programs to see that all students succeed through different types of academic support and curricular structure. One suggestion he made was to better focus the educational path of students by narrowing the number of choices students have for courses, which would increase students’ understanding of the material (Aydelotte, 1944). He equated too many choices within the traditional higher education structure with one of the main reasons that students could not or were not encouraged to think for themselves. Aydelotte created a narrow curricular focus, which provided the opportunity for his

students to ponder and rationally think through situations and problems (Aydelotte, 1944; Chaszar, 2008). Aydelotte's method of limiting choices of classes and more individualized teaching methods enabled honors students to navigate complex issues. This type of instructional method pushed students' critical thinking skills (Aydelotte, 1944). Once professors saw that the students were successful in their assignments, they were then able to give the students great freedom at completing assignments. For example, the professors found that many times students completed their assignments without having a firm date for submitting final projects. This type of intellectual measurement for honors students has continued to evolve to include the time it takes students to complete their degree, addition of majors and/or minors and their thirst for knowledge (Achterberg, 2005). The characteristic of honors students of being self-driven is also paired with what the college or university has available for honors students to access (Achterberg, 2005). Without the consistent improvement of technology, resources, study space, and safe educational environments, honors students would not be fully able to excel (Achterberg, 2005).

Honors programs support their students through their higher education experience so that they succeed inside and outside the classroom. For example, today's students are dealing with the pressure associated with being intelligent among their peers, just as they did in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Cohen, 1966). In 1966, Cohen described observing a colloquium on *Oedipus Rex*:

I asked the fourteen freshmen if they could describe how this colloquium differed from their regular freshman courses. One boy responded at once. "My main feeling, sir, is that of being free." "What do you mean by free?" The answer was: "I come from a family where we read and discuss books. In high school last year,

I felt obliged to hide the fact or be regarded as a square. In this group I find that I am with boys and girls like myself. We all read and love to discuss what we read. Here I feel free to be myself to the utmost.” (p. 5)

The recurring theme of freedom to embrace one’s intelligence within honors programs continues to resurface, even in comparing students from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to students in today’s American colleges and universities. As alluded to in the above passage, students may internalize their intelligence as negative and/or suppress it to be welcome or fully embraced within their peer group (Bursztyn, Egorov, & Jensen, 2017). For African American female students within honors programs, questions have been posed to them regarding how they feel about the labels that may be associated with an honors program, for example the words ‘smart’ or ‘gifted’ (Davis, 2018). Davis (2018) found that these individuals did not fully embrace those labels because they may have been withdrawn within the campus community or may find themselves to be shy as they interact in their honors courses (Davis, 2018). While White students may feel freer in an honors environment, the same may not be true for African American women as they grapple with cultural differences that their White peers do not experience (Allen et al., 1991; Davis, 2018).

The hypothesis of “acting white” (Austen-Smith & Fryer, 2005; Fordham, 1985; Fryer 2007; Fryer & Torelli, 2010) assists in unhooking an educational social phenomenon where individuals who may have high ability rarely show their intelligence, or may be afraid to show their intelligence in front of their peers (Bursztyn et al., 2017). Although the acting white hypothesis has largely been associated with African American students, there are many researchers who have shown that this phenomenon is not solely



found within the African American or other communities of color (Bursztyn et al., 2017). Students may believe that they will pay a social cost for their intelligence; however, by focusing on the contributions of the Black woman intellectual, as discussed by Hill Collins (2000), this may further support educators and honors programs in continuing to reduce the social pressure African American female students may feel, showing them that there is freedom in embracing their intelligence.

Honors program structure, or the adapted English system of educating a select few, has largely remained unchanged, as noted above. However, as with higher education in general, this niche academic program has been faced with the challenges of the country's changing demographics, especially regarding the increasing number of students of color enrolling in American colleges and universities (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). Such increased enrollment has created multicultural communities throughout higher education (Yamane, 2001). Honors programs have responded to these changes by keeping their program structure consistent yet being able to respond to needs of the students, institution, and community.

These changes to higher education have also assisted honors programs with ensuring that their students feel and know they are a part of the fabric of the program and the institution as a whole (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). Conversations about how students are taught continue to push education forward so that students' voices are acknowledged and included in the discussion to ensure their educational experience supports their voice (NCHC, 2012). Consequently, some of the (relatively) newer honors programs have made notable changes. For example, the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA)

honors program, while continuing to adhere to the central part of NCHC guidelines, has modified its curriculum to support its students' needs. In its strategic plan, UTSA's honors program discusses the important role diversity plays in its program, because 43% of its enrolled students are Latino/a (UTSA, 2012).

Whereas the NCHC may not have updated its operating principles, collegiate honors programs have realized that diversity is not only important within education but also crucial for students to achieve their highest potential. The operating principles offer a clear guide for programs to be recognized by not only the NCHC but also their host institutions. By not updating operating principles, the NCHC may be missing opportunities for the growth of American honors programs. Program examples, such as the one from UTSA, provide a small window into what programs consider important in recognizing the need to serve their diverse student body. Unfortunately, there is little research on the aggregate impact honors programs have on students regarding the implementation of diverse efforts.

### **Honors Program Curriculum**

Curriculum is as individual as the students who have the privilege to learn from it (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). The term *curriculum* is broadly defined as a theory on how courses and their materials are taught in a myriad of classrooms (Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Curriculum also heavily influences the experience students have outside the classroom (Yosso, 2002). Curriculum in the context of an honors program may also be defined as the "blood" that is transferred from professors to students, because so much is given to students from the professors (Pinar et al., 1995). In the recently published

NCHC monograph diversity series, *Occupy Honors* by Coleman, Kotinek, and Oda (2017), honors curriculum and its influence to address the changing needs of the nation and students is at the forefront.

Within the field of curriculum, language continues to evolve to where the term *development* is not as diverse as it needs to be; another term being paired with curriculum is *understanding* (Pinar et al., 1995). This implies that as curriculum is written, the understanding goes beyond the classroom and into society, culture, and its people—it is solidly rooted in the world (Pinar et al., 1995). Another part of understanding curriculum is that curriculum is no longer linear but rather a complex system designed to educate students with a mix of traditional and modern information (Pinar et al., 1995).

Honors programs recognize the significance of curriculum and its relationship in influencing American society to push towards the democratic philosophy of the sharing of power (Coleman et al., 2017). In a democratic society, collegiate curriculum is crafted for the professor and students to critically process problems and everyday situations to ensure a better society (Pinar et al., 1995). Furthermore, supporting the commitment to developing thinkers, the American honors programs have dedicated a significant amount of their curriculum to liberal arts education, which is ultimately meant to ensure an increased strengthening of the American democracy (Aydelotte, 1944).

In 1944, Franklin D. Roosevelt was president and the United States was committed to the Second World War. In juxtaposing 1944 to 2019, 75 years later, the democracy of the United States is different (Licht, 1988). Women were largely not working in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century to now where women are now head of households and

the breadwinner (Licht, 1988). In 1944, the majority of African American college students were attending HBCUs and by the 1990s less than 20% were attending HBCUs (Freeman & Thomas, 2002). In Aydelotte's democratic America, African American women were not a consideration for how honors programs could be a place to serve these individuals (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003). Considering that many of the characteristics of a complete honors program were developed because of Aydelotte's work, if he knew that the American society that he knew would be so different 75 years later, he may have been able to establish honors programs where they modeled equity and other academic programs followed their equitable lead (Chaszar, 2008; Davis, 2018).

Critical pedagogy is fundamental to the philosophy underlying the curriculum of honors programs. Moreover, honors programs understand that their work with pushing critical pedagogy through curriculum impacts curriculum throughout the institution (Coleman et al., 2017). Critical pedagogy in honors programs stems from the work of Freire (1970) to ensure that the curriculum and its absorption does not resemble the traditional banking method (Coleman et al., 2017). Coleman et al. (2017) pointed out that "critical pedagogy is sensitive to the relationship between power and knowledge. It also actively works to dismantle systems of oppression created by the relationship between the two" (p. 20).

In essence, an institution's core curriculum reflects the values of the institution (Stark & Latucca, 1997), and the same may be true for honors programs. Curriculum remains the focal point of higher education and honors programs (Chaszar, 2008; Guzy, 2003), because it ensures that knowledge and thinking progress through academia to

communities. When focusing on curriculum and honors programs, it must be emphasized that the faculty have the critical challenge of ensuring that their students have the tools they need, through structured curriculum, to not only learn the information but also process it (Stark & Latucca, 1997). This critical lens serves to ensure curriculum progresses to address the changing needs of American society. Critical race curriculum may be able to provide a lens which may be able to support honors programs in broadening the curricular offerings (Yosso, 2002).

Critical race curriculum, as defined by Yosso (2002), represents “a framework to analyze and challenge racism in curricular structures, processes, and discourses” (p. 93). It serves as a tool that educators can use to examine not only classroom curriculum but also the overall educational experience a student may have. If any program, for example an honors program, has largely remained unchanged for over half a century, it may be perceived that it has not changed or become modern. Through the lens of critical race curriculum, programs steeped in tradition and history benefit from unpacking that tradition and examining how their tradition is affecting all the students within their programs (Yosso, 2002). The process of unpacking may entail that the program carefully examines its curricular structures (how the program is established), process (how students find their way to the program), and discourses (why these students are able to benefit from the program) (Yosso, 2002). Research that examines curriculum has found that the curricular materials often distort or omit the experiences of students of color (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings; 1995; Yosso, 2002). Changes to not only curriculum but also the philosophy behind it often prove a difficult process to undertake (Pinar et al., 1995). The

gap of information concerning how critical race curriculum is utilized (or if it is being utilized) in honors programs does not enable one to know how this theory influences the curricular choices of honors program faculty.

### **Honors Program Research**

There have been two studies conducted that research demographic data of collegiate undergraduate honors programs. One was conducted by Harrison-Cook (1999), the other by Coleman and Kotinek (2010), entitled “Setting the Table for Diversity,” as part of the 2010 *NCHC Monograph Series*. Harrison-Cook conducted two surveys: one for large public PWIs and the other for small-to-medium public and private PWIs. Harrison-Cook’s study was one of the first to demonstrate the underrepresentation of African Americans, both male and female, in undergraduate honors programs. The core of her findings showed that African Americans represented 2.2% of the total student population in undergraduate honors programs at that time. While Harrison-Cook identified that only 2.2% of honors programs consisted of African American students, she did not report on other student populations. By solely focusing on African American students she assisted in continuing the non-comparative conversation regarding African American students in higher education (Hill Collins, 2000). Her study sought to understand why such disparity existed and what could be done to close this gap for more African American students to become part of collegiate honors programs (Harrison-Cook, 1999).

Once African American students can find their way into honors programs or high-level academic programs, such as in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and

mathematics) fields, their retention rates are strong because they also receive academic and intellectual support (Fries-Britt, Younger, & Hall, 2010; Sanon-Jules, 2010). However, gaining access to these programs continues to be an issue (Harrison-Cook, 1999). Harrison-Cook (1999) suggested that some issues of racism may be to blame for the small numbers of African American students participating in honors programs. The racist incidences that Harrison-Cook (1999) discusses range from homophobic slurs to Black men being searched at a party while White men are not. Harrison-Cook (1999) also included discussion with students who, although eligible, were not a part of the honors program, having chosen not to apply because they worried that the additional academic work might jeopardize their grade point average, eventually impacting their scholarships and financial aid. This latter finding may indicate that African American students are not as academically confident or willing to take a risk for higher academic achievement through the assistance of a collegiate honors program.

The 2010 *NCHC Monograph Series* by Coleman and Kotinek titled, “Setting the Table for Diversity,” covered a wide range of topics regarding diversity in honors programs. Ranging from defining diversity in honors programs to challenges and opportunities to the call for transformative diversity, the *Monograph Series* provided a much-needed overview of current honors programs and diversity. In moving diversity work forward, the series addressed the issue of honors programs’ going beyond solely increasing the number of enrolled students of color to a focus on the whole student and student experience within these programs (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). Even though honors programs have set themselves apart from some of the changes that higher

education has experienced over the last few decades, the programs are acknowledging that both diversity and the well-being of their students of color are important (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). Beyond their finding that recognizing the individual is important, Coleman and Kotinek were curious as to how many students of color were represented in American collegiate honors programs. What they found was that the number of African American students enrolled in honors programs had decreased. In 2010, these researchers reported that of the 11,219 total honors program students, .06% (775) identified as African American, whereas Harrison-Cook's 1999 finding showed that 2.2% identified as African American in that same category. Coleman and Kotinek also reported that of the total honors program students, 46% (5,161) identified as female. These statistics indicate that the number of African Americans enrolled in an honors program students decreased from 1999 to 2010, and that men outnumber women in honors programs.

### **Honors Programs Best Practices**

There have been many well-established honors programs throughout higher education in the United States. The honors programs that are receiving the most national attention are those focused on STEM disciplines and those that specifically target students of color (Gordon & Bridglall, 2004). There are several programs that are changing the face of honors programs in America. Those of particular note include the Myerhoff Scholars Program at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County and the Joaquín Bustoz Math-Science Honors Program at Arizona State University.

The Myerhoff Scholars Program, founded in 1988, was a collaboration between the president of the University of Maryland-Baltimore County and philanthropists,



Robert and Jane Myerhoff (Maton, Hrabowski, & Schmitt, 2000). Established with a gift of \$500,000, the program originally began to address the lack of participation by African American men within the STEM pipeline (Maton et al., 2000). In 2004, scholars Gordon and Bridglall reported that since its inception, the Myerhoff Scholars Program prepared over 500 students, both men and women, to enter postgraduate programs in medicine, science, and engineering. The program is an all-encompassing one that surrounds students with support from the summer before their first year to ongoing mentorship opportunities throughout their college career (Gordon & Bridglall, 2004; Maton et al., 2000). The pride that is instilled in the students going through the program is so strong that earning a Ph.D. is the main focus for the students, whereas becoming a medical doctor is considered a failure (Maton et al., 2000).

The Joaquín Bustoz Math-Science Honors Program of Arizona State University specifically works with Latino/a and Native American high school students in Arizona to encourage their success in math and science. Founded in 1985 by Dr. Joaquín Bustoz, the program prepares high school students for scientific careers. Auffret (2010) reported that over its 25 years, the program assisted in hundreds of its alumni becoming math and science teachers in Arizona, and over 95% of the attendees earned a college degree.

These two programs specifically address the gap in science degrees between the White population and students of color (Adams, 1990). An example of this gap can be seen in the late 1980s: Blacks comprised 12% of the population, but only 2% were employed as scientists and engineers (Adams, 1990; Maton et al., 2000). This gap continued to deepen for many reasons, notable among them being (a) the educational

focus shifted from a more holistic method of educating students to teaching driven by standardized tests (Maton et al., 2000), (b) the socioeconomic differences between White families and families of color in America often placed college out of reach, and (c) students of color had lower college entrance exam scores (Maton et al., 2000). Moreover, Maton et al. (2000) observed that even though students of color initially enroll in higher numbers in STEM programs, they often change their major and do not complete their degree in these disciplines. The Myerhoff Scholars Program and the Joaquín Bustoz Math-Science Honors Program represented relatively new types of STEM programs that were developed to keep students of color in the science pipeline.

### **African American Women in Higher Education and Intersectionality**

In much of the research on students of color in college, men and women are studied together or men are the focus of the studies (Settles, 2006). As stated earlier, rarely are African American women the sole focus of studies (Settles, 2006). Regardless of the type of study, there are two main themes that have emerged: (a) Students closely identify with their African American identity and are often the only student of color in their advanced education courses, which may be honors courses (Brooks, 2012; Fries-Brit, 2000; Fries-Brit et al., 2010; Griffin, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), and (b) African American female students in higher education often speak of feeling as if they either have a spotlight on them or are completely invisible (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). The spotlight may occur if they are asked to speak for their race, and the invisibility occurs when they are ignored in discussions, group work, and general classroom occurrences (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). While dealing with feelings of being African American and female, a

female African American student in an honors program may also be dealing with her academic self, which is another identity that she must successfully maneuver (Fries-Britt, 2000). With any type of identity development, it takes time for individuals to grasp and embrace identity (Fries-Britt, 2000). For African American women in a collegiate honors program, they may be even more aware than those African American women outside the program of their surroundings and their experiences, perhaps because of their heightened intelligence and their experiences. The increase in the number of African American women entering American higher education and earning a degree surpassed the number of African American men earning degrees, according to Zamani (2003). Yet, regardless of the rate of degree attainment, African American female students continue to feel as if they are marginal versus feeling that they matter within higher education (Jackson, 1998).

The concept of *intersectionality* has been described by Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) as “an analytic tool of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience” (p. 25). The fact that legally, the burden was placed upon African American females to prove that their experience as an African American and as a woman creates disparities versus the employer’s being required to ensure equity in the workplace further marginalizes the experiences of these individuals (Crenshaw, 1989). In American higher education, the changes to policies, tuition, and overall access may negatively impact those most sensitive to such changes—African American women, for example (Hill Collins, 2016). In using intersectionality as a tool to analyze these changes regarding African American women in higher education, it may be found that tuition changes may force these students to “stop out,” increase work hours for additional

income, or reduce the number of courses they take per semester, which may lead to their not graduating, graduating later than expected, and/or increasing their student debt.

Overall, the intersectional relationship of African American women and higher education is as complex as it is fascinating. This intersectional relationship can show how race, gender, power dynamics, and the social impact of an African American woman's experience within a collegiate honors program further inform the construction of an affirming culture that does not diminish, but rather elevates the experiences of these individuals (Hill Collins, 2016).

### **Oppression**

Oppression can be described as “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 4). African American women are often faced with negotiating two forms of oppression: racism and sexism. Being a woman and a woman of color creates a unique dynamic that may force these individuals to have to pick and choose pieces of their identity to successfully navigate their lives (hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006). The act of choosing pieces of their identity may be referred to as “unhooking” (Settles, 2006). Believing that African American women can or have a duty to unhook their gender or race from one another is not supportive of the life experience of African American women (Settles, 2006). Although there are other forms of oppression that African American women face, for example, sexual, social, economic, and political, the bond of gender and race for African American women is one of the most salient to examine (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006; Williams & Wiggins, 2010).

The intersection of race and gender for African American women is forefront in this dissertation because of the intricate balance these individuals strike due to the political and social circumstances in which they may find themselves (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). If Black women are unable or perhaps even unwilling to recognize the significance of the intersection, they may face depression and low self-esteem and may question their identity (Settles, 2006). When members of a particular population are not able to identify themselves, others may do it for them, often in a negative way (Settles, 2006). Settles (2006) spoke to this point as follows:

Black women may be depicted by the media in ways that play on the unique negative, often sexualized, stereotypes of the Black woman, such as Jezebel, who is hypersexual and promiscuous; Mammy who is nurturing; or Sapphire, who is domineering and emasculating. (p. 590)

Even though these stereotypes are from the media, the reality of the African American female experience is that race and gender are intertwined, and the recognition that one cannot be discussed without the other is critical for the dialogue to shift regarding African American women (Settles, 2006; Zamani, 2003). The continued dismantling of the identity of the African American female may negatively impact the experience of African American women in college (Settles, 2006; Zamani, 2003).

The impact may be seen in a predominantly white classroom where an African American woman is asked to speak for her race without consideration for how awkward a position that may place her in (Harrison-Cook, 1999). This pressure may lead to the continued silencing of Black women. Regardless of the answer they provide (if they choose to answer at all), they continue to be forced to choose between not answering for their perceived identities or answering while knowing their answer cannot be all-

inclusive of those who may identify as they do (Settles, 2006). Being in predominately white spaces where Black women may be “the only” causes stress and feelings of isolation, as mentioned earlier (Harrison-Cook, 1999; Settles, 2006). Speaking for one’s own race diminishes the experiences of the individual to the group, which is rarely asked outside of communities of color (Allen et al., 1991, Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Taylor, 1998). A focus on African American women reveals their experience in college and within honors programs as one to be cherished and not lumped into experiences that are not their own, for example with other women or with African American men (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006; Zamani, 2003).

Research also suggests that although there is stress associated with these types of interactions, Black women are also able to identify positively with their race and gender (Hill Collins, 1990; Settles, 2006). In many instances, Black women more strongly identify with their race versus their gender. For example, one may hear a reference begin, “as a Black woman” and not, “as a woman Black” (Settles, 2006). This further illustrates the connection that Black women feel to all of their identities and that they embrace them as they rarely have a choice whether or not to embrace their identities (Hill Collins, 1990; Settles, 2006). Placing race first in the identity of African American women may also be due to the significance of the racialized history of the United States (Hill Collins, 1990). The historical focus on race in the United States continues to impact African American women in how they are compared to others in research, the lack of recognition for academic achievement and how they are often relegated to being invisible or superinvisible (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Hill Collins, 1990; Settles, 2006)

Being asked to speak for an entire group of individuals is insensitive, comparing African American women to African American men is another issue within itself—another form of oppression that Black women face. There is a phrase in the Black community that says, “Mothers love their sons and raise their daughters” (Mandara, Varner, & Richman, 2010, p. 41). Many believe this may mean that Black children are socialized differently. Girls are raised to be responsible, overcome obstacles, achieve in education and beyond, and also be self-reliant (Mandara et al., 2010). Boys may not be held to the same standards as they grow up, meaning that their mothers may not believe their sons are as strong and independent as their daughters (Mandara et al., 2010). This may contribute to the increasing academic achievement gap between Black females and Black males (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Mandara et al., 2010). Regardless of the way African American women and men have been raised, African American women continue to be relegated to the lowest social status (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006). The recognition given to Black men and not to Black women, despite their academic achievements, indirectly causes Black women to become invisible or even superinvisible (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007).

Relating invisibility to African American women’s experiences may mean being mentally and physically present in a space with others, yet not being acknowledged as a person or for what they may contribute intellectually. Translating this into everyday situations, African American women may not be heard in meetings despite their ongoing contributions to conversations, in classrooms where the assumption may be that they are not academically prepared, and in their own communities where they must take a back

seat to men (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles 2006). The interesting dichotomy of African American women and invisibility is that it creates situations where African American women may be labeled at risk because they do not receive the support that others do or where overcompensation occurs for not being previously recognized (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). Invisibility may not mean that they are not seen, but rather that their existence is often diminished because they are succeeding at higher rates than their African American male colleagues and other women (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007).

The paradox that African American women endure causes them to be on guard defending who they are and their intelligence, which could directly reference the “angry Black woman.” There are many examples of African American women in college-level classes being questioned about their academic qualifications by both their peers and professors (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). Regardless of being questioned about their existence and whether or not they are invisible, throughout herstory, African American women have been instrumental in American civil rights movements.

### **Historical Context**

In the historical context of freedom movements, African American women focused more of their energy on racism and its outcomes rather than sexism (hooks, 1981). During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, African American women believed that focusing on the worst of the two (racism) would be beneficial in improving the lives of all African Americans and not solely women (hooks, 1981). This conscious decision not to address both racism and sexism may have inadvertently negatively impacted African American women and their work for equality. This impact can be seen in research and literature that



do not address the intersected life experience of Black women (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006). The intersecting elements of these two isms, racism and sexism, make examining the path of African American women intriguing as they overcome oppression, while succeeding academically (hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006; Zamani, 2003). The study of both racism and sexism simultaneously is significant because African American women in an undergraduate academic setting navigate these identities perhaps without full realization of what they are accomplishing (hooks, 1981; Settles, 2006; Zamani, 2003).

The studies that focus on the intersectionality of African American women and how they navigate their issues related to sexism and racism have found that Black women use tactics to succeed despite oppression, such as seeking support from female friends and family members, or they may coach themselves through situations, or they may choose not to address what is happening around them (Settles, 2006; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). These and other strategies assist African American women in being nimble regarding their life situations (Lykes, 1983; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). For example, manifestations of success despite oppression may involve the Black woman becoming an overachiever in everything, which may be interpreted as developing a defensive shield to protect and prove oneself (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). This type of defensive shield may assist in empowering African American women to continue achieving and moving forward as they are confronted with challenges through life but may not fully address the needs of Black women (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

## **Sexism and Racism in Education**

Many of the challenges preventing equity for women in the American educational system may come from the perceived notions of women's roles in society, in addition to how they are educated (Allen et al., 1991; Stulberg & Weinberg, 2011). Even though African American women's academic achievement is significant and may be higher than that of other women of color, these achievements are diminished or even ignored (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). As mentioned earlier, it is rare that African American females are researched solely on their own, especially regarding educational attainment; they are usually studied in conjunction with Caucasian females or other females of color (Marsh, 2013; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, 1998; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Settles, 2006; Williams & Wiggins, 2010). Beyond exploring their education attainment, this research was designed to examine the educational lives of African American women to strengthen those who are on a collegiate academic path and those who will come behind them. Recognizing that there are differences in not only how African American females gain access to education, but also their entrance exam performance, interaction with curriculum, educational success, and academic preparation means that although there are similarities within the group, there is variability in achievement among African American women (Marsh, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2015; Zamani, 2003). These differences represent a few examples where sexism may have a profound effect upon the educational development and educational path of African American women (Zamani, 2003).

American society often relegates African American women to one of the last (perceived) positions of its citizens (Settles, 2006). The order may be interpreted as follows: White men first, White women second, African American men third, and then African American women fourth (Zamani, 2003). Regardless of an arbitrary placement of rank as to where African American women may be placed, the acknowledgement of their academic and life success means more than a numeric grade point average or their college degree (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Their success is built not only upon their personal story, but also by generations of female activists who sought to ensure American education was available and supportive for the future college-educated African American women (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This study focuses on the academic and educational experience of African American women and not their failures (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Further, they deserve to be in the spotlight, because they embody a force of their own, and their stories must be shared to balance the overrepresented negative narratives concerning African American women.

### **Identity**

African American women are both African American (their ethnicity) and female (their gender) (Hill Collins 1991; Settles, 2006). These identities are intertwined and cannot be separated (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). Though not seamless, African American women simultaneously navigate through both women's and racial issues, often without the realization of the intricacy and significance of the navigation (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). College campuses offer a variety of organized activities that are developed to address needs for a diverse student population. In addressing those diverse

needs, African American women may participate in programming for women; however, it is rare for activities to be solely for African American women (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). The significance of programs solely dedicated to African American women is that such programs build their self-esteem and provide a space for them to not only solidify their identity but also share their experiences with other women (Hill Collins, 2000).

Without the layered support necessary on a predominantly white college campus, such as dedication to inclusive excellence and clubs and organizations solely for African American women, these individuals may have little opportunity to develop close personal relationships while in college (Settles, 2006). The ability to provide support for African American women on college campuses is important so that these women feel whole and do not have to separate their intersected identities of race and gender (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). Perhaps at no other time in their life will they have this unique opportunity for exploration of self, because that is a large part of what a college education provides: self-exploration. Higher education has a profound obligation to nurture this developmental stage (Sanon-Jules, 2010). When the stages of growth and change that college students, especially students of color, experience are also taken into consideration, African American women enrolled in honors programs may feel further isolation (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). Honors programs may be able to provide opportunities for these women to solidify and understand their cultural, ethnic, and gender identity through focused program initiatives to support African American women

and their life's journey of fusing and navigating their intersectional identities: being a woman, being African American, and being a person of high academic achievement.

### **Conclusion**

As American higher education has evolved, collegiate honors programs have evolved as well. Although honors programs have stayed close to their original roots, developed by Frank Aydolette almost 100 years ago, collegiate honors programs are diligently working to embrace the changes that students, society, and the institutions that house them have experienced for many decades. Staying close to their origins is admirable, however honors program participants may not fully mirror the composition of the general student body. Thus, honors programs may not be providing opportunities to students that deserve to be a part of these programs.

This literature review supports the position that inclusivity and honors programs need to become more tightly aligned for the programs to grow and remain a viable resource in American higher education (Bell, 2008; Coleman & Kotlinek, 2010). The call for honors programs to not only embrace inclusivity but also become more inclusive is now. Examples of programs that have been intentional in practicing inclusivity have been provided above, yet there is more that can be done. Currently, there are more enrolled college students that identify as being part of a minority group (based on ethnicity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, etc.) than ever before. Higher education continues to respond to the needs of its students and the needs of America; the programs within higher education, for example honors programs, must equally respond. The influence of honors programs should not be ignored nor denied; moreover, the expectation that honors

programs embrace and practice inclusivity should be more widely adopted. Within the context of this expectation, the aim of this dissertation is to inform about the lived experiences of African American women within collegiate honors programs.

### CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY - AKOBEN

This qualitative study explored the phenomenon of the academic journey (Patton, 2002) experienced by African American women currently or recently enrolled in an American collegiate honors program. The rationale for using hermeneutic phenomenology is that pairing the methodology with Black feminist thought (BFT) enabled me, the researcher, to more fully share the experiences of these women through their lens. Chapter 3 includes an overview of the study's methodology and a discussion regarding the importance of the qualitative hermeneutical approach. It also describes the selection criteria for the study as well as the relevance of the research design, data collection procedures, internal and external validity, and an analysis of the data. Chapter 3 is named Akoben for the Adinkra symbol for readiness and preparedness (Danzy, 2009). This chapter was utilized to prepare the researcher for the process of gathering the data. It enabled the researcher to prepare to gather the data and to be prepared for the analysis portion of the dissertation process. The following research questions guided this exploration:

1. What are the academic paths experienced by African American women that have prepared them for entrance and success within a collegiate honors program?

2. What are the lived experiences of African American women who currently are or recently have been enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program?

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

In general, the study of a particular phenomenon (often referred to as phenomenology) or what the experiences of a group or a person are may become mixed with several other branches of phenomenology, such as heuristic inquiry (experience of the researcher within the phenomenon) or ethnomethodology (focus on the ordinary or the routine) (Patton, 2002). In many references, hermeneutics and phenomenology are treated as being the same or interchangeable (Patton, 2002). Even though the two methods are closely tied, they are distinctly different forms of qualitative evaluation. The most significant difference between the two methods is that hermeneutics does not require the researcher to set herself apart from the experience of the study participants (Lavery, 2003). For both hermeneutics and phenomenology, the path of understanding is one that does not start and stop at a particular time, it is a continually flowing movement (Lavery, 2003). In considering the flow of understanding, I initially believed that the women who would be involved in the study and I would have familiar backgrounds. However, in consideration of positionality, I must ensure that I do not project my own biases and lived experiences upon them, nor make assumptions on what I perceive to be their lived experiences. As the researcher, I am seeking to describe experiences purely based on the trust that the participants privilege me with.

Keeping in mind Moustakas's (1994) wisdom that "interpretation unmask what is hidden behind the objective phenomena" (p. 10), I sought to fully engage in the text to



see what the meanings were within the words of the women (Moustakas, 1994). My interpretation was greatly aided by BFT and its tenets. The tenets, especially the third tenet that embodies “the connections among lived experiences with oppression, developing one’s own point of view concerning those experiences, and the acts of resistance that can follow” (Hill Collins, 1991, p. 30), helped ensure that the thoughts of these African American women as they pertain to their educational pursuits are fully examined.

The Greek god, Hermes, is often referenced as being the inspiration behind the method of hermeneutics (Ferraris, 1996; Moules, 2002; Packer & Addison, 1989). Hermes was known to be a trickster (Bakula, 2017). As the legend is told, on the day he was born, he became bored and stole 50 oxen from his half-brother, Apollo. To throw people off their path from following him, he reversed the hooves of the oxen to make it seem as if they were going in the opposite direction (Bakula, 2017). As an adult, his task was to communicate and translate messages from the gods to humans living on Earth (Bakula, 2017). Because the humans had trouble understanding what the gods were trying to tell them, the task of interpretation was vital to such understanding between the two groups (Packer & Addison, 1989).

As the researcher, I, like Hermes, was charged with interpreting the data from the participants’ interviews and delivering these data in such a way that those who may not be in academia or connected to an honors program are able to understand the participants’ experiences (Packer & Addison, 1989). Although these experiences of the participants are solely theirs, they serve as an example of today’s impact of higher education on

African American female students who are seeking to gain more out of their educational experience. For many in the African American community, success in education remains a significant milestone and may also be considered sacred, because the memories of discrimination and injustice may never be fully removed. Bakula (2017) also referred to Hermes as a psychotherapist, because he “guided souls or people through significant passages in their lives . . . when we dare to explore new frontiers with an open spirit and attitude” (p. 3). The new spirit and attitude is viewing these experiences through an asset-based lens, which will assist in providing a stronger path for others to follow.

Society is full of messages that its citizens continually interpret as correctly as possible, acting upon those messages to be accepted within our social and professional circles (Schmidt, 2006). Examples of those messages may be African American students being asked a question and not feeling singled out but rather comfortable showing and owning their intelligence, or a father teaching his son etiquette in the presence of authority figures and that son understanding the proper time and place to utilize those lessons on etiquette. Regardless of the type of message one receives, its interpretation is key for continued understanding so that one feels included and accepted within societal norms (Packer & Addison, 1989). In American higher education, the interpretation of African American female students’ experience may be viewed with a deficit lens and not from an asset-based lens (Allen et al., 1991; Banks, 2009; Evans, 2007). For example, there are comparative studies of African American women as compared to other women regarding their failures and not their successes (Settles, 2006), or the charting of why African American women are unable to effectively progress from high school to college

(Patton, 2009). The goal for this study was to examine the success of the participants and their path to their educational success.

Relevant to the study, Schmidt (2006) observed, “The strict practice of hermeneutics assumes that misunderstanding usually occurs, hence interpretation is always required” (p. 6). Based on the realization that the voices of the African American women who participated in this study have not been heard in mainstream society nor in higher education, the notion that I, the researcher, might not correctly interpret their stories was an overwhelming and humbling thought. However, with the guidance of both modern and contemporary philosophers who developed hermeneutics and its processes, I was able to meld hermeneutic philosophy and BFT. The melding of hermeneutics (interpretation of participants’ words) and BFT (from the African American female perspective) allowed for the depth of these stories to be told through an asset-based lens. Hermeneutical phenomenology has been described as focusing on the subjective experience of individuals and groups (Bleicher, 1980; Ferraris, 1996; Patton, 2002). As such, it was vital in my exploration of the phenomenology of African American women in collegiate honors programs.

The past informs the present; however, the present is not bound by that information (Bleicher, 1980). The present has the opportunity (and perhaps duty) to understand the past to ensure the present is not pigeonholed into looking back because of past injustices (Bleicher, 1980; Hill Collins, 2000). Examining the history of American higher education and its treatment of African American women is undertaken in this study to further understand how higher education currently does or does not embrace

African American women and their educational needs. BFT supports the women in their educational journey to explain their experiences without the power structure explaining it for them (the concept of self-definition) (Hill Collins, 2000). Yes, there has been discrimination, and African American women have been marginalized within their educational pursuits; however, that does not mean they did not chart their own experiences nor indicate that their stories were unworthy (Hill Collins, 1989, 2000; Zamani, 2003). The Black community has a rich history of orally passing down stories from generation to generation (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981). Black women who have shared their stories—bell hooks, Maya Angelou, Mae Jemison, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to name a few—have all contributed to the continued need to shed light on the significance of African American female students who often must stand alone in their educational spaces, especially within honors programs.

The study's understanding of the institutional environment was particularly important because the culture of honors programs was examined at a PWI where the participants were asked to explain their place within the institutional culture. This is consistent with Lavery's (2003) statement, "Hermeneutics is the study of human cultural activity as texts with a view towards interpretation to find intended or expressed meaning" (p. 24). Whereas PWIs have worked to provide more access to higher education for students of color, the examination of the experiences of African American students in general and African American women in particular is linked directly to the environment they encounter (Zamani, 2003). The educational environment of Olde Southern State University (OSSU), coupled with the decision-making process of this

study's participants to attend OSSU as an honors program participant, allowed me to find the hermeneutical meaning in their experiences.

In planning this research study, I found many aspects to study with African American women and their educational path, especially those enrolled in an honors program. For example, I could have investigated whether they were destined to become part of an honors program because they had been in gifted and talented programs throughout their lives, or whether college opened a new world for them because honors allowed them to be academically free. In addition to those aspects, this study sought to chart the path of the women as they prepared academically, socially, and with the help of their families for their educational journey. By tying those paths to their success and challenges in the honors program, hermeneutics and BFT allowed me as the researcher to show the depth of their experiences.

To further explain hermeneutics, I sought to understand the environment as it was presented to me, as suggested by van Manen (1990). Pairing the five concepts of BFT (outsider-within, intellectual activism, matrix of domination, controlling images, and self-definition) with hermeneutical phenomenology brought to life the stories of the eight women who chose to be the participants in this study. The significance of hermeneutic phenomenology is to interpret not solely the interview texts of the participants but also how the honors program shaped their collegiate experiences (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Hermeneutic phenomenology pushed me to reveal the essence and the truth of their lived experiences, and BFT assisted in focusing their racial and gendered experiences as African American women (Hill Collins, 2000; Lindseth & Norberg, 2004).

## **The Hermeneutical Circle or Spiral**

The methodology of hermeneutics is unique in that this branch of phenomenology focuses on the interpretation of the knowledge or text. The text was generated through a series of participant interviews that provided in-depth views of their experience as a student in a collegiate honors program. Another element that distinguishes hermeneutics is the hermeneutical circle or spiral. The circle or spiral is a visual depiction of the participants' experience that challenges the researcher to decide where to begin and end the interpretation of the lived experience (Packer & Addison, 1989). Depending on how one understands or interprets the circle, it may be a curse or a blessing; and in reviewing the literature, researchers have often questioned where the circle begins, or at what point or section one enters the circle (Packer & Addison, 1989). This is an ongoing frustration with researchers using hermeneutics, because it is difficult to decide where to begin interpretation and when/where to end it.

Even though there is a "circle of understanding" within hermeneutics, there are critical points along the circle that allow for clearer understanding of the life being examined (Packer & Addison, 1989). Packer and Addison (1989) provided this example: "A practical starting point is the place where we, as psychologists, inevitably begin our research, but it is located in human interactions, not mastery of the environment" (p. 23). What these scholars are speaking of here is, beginning in a humbling space within the research. It is a place the researcher understands as a moving target; and she or he is always moving towards that target, all the while interpreting the interactions. Much of the literature regarding the circle explains how frustrating the circle is for the researcher or

how difficult it is to find a way in and, therefore, out of the circle. What is important to keep in mind is how and where to enter the circle (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Regardless of the circle's entry or exit point or whether the circle is frustrating or not, this is the essence of hermeneutics. This is where the researcher will understand the scientific nature of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Instead of bracketing, the circle assists the researcher to suspend assumptions and her or his own thoughts to more fully share the lives of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Recruitment Process and Participant Selection**

#### **Purposeful Sampling of Participants**

In this qualitative research study, the term *who* clearly refers to African American women who are currently in collegiate honors programs at PWIs. I used the method of purposeful sampling to select the participants. According to Creswell (2007), in purposeful sampling, "the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125). In addition, my use of maximum variation and criteria within the purposeful sample allowed for my selection of the participants to be diverse yet have similar characteristics for this study (Creswell, 2007). When determining sample size for phenomenological studies, Creswell recommended 7 to 10 participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study. For this study, 8 participants chose to share their stories. Eight, which turned out to be an ideal number, allowed me to become thoroughly immersed in the culture of the institution and connect with the participants (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The following criteria were used for participant selection:

1. Participant identifies racially as African American or Black;
2. Participant identifies self as female;
3. Participant currently is or has been enrolled in an honors program or honors college in the United States within the last 5 years.

For the eight participants, the similar experience of participating in an honors program at the same institution gave a richness of time and space that would not have been achieved if these participants had been in honor programs at different institutions and perhaps in different areas of the country. The study was conducted at OSSU, where there was a possible sample size of approximately 35 women that identified as African American within their honors program.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

After I received approval from the University of Denver's Institutional Review Board, I began formulating the recruitment process. For this study, the most effective way to recruit participants was to work directly with the institution's (OSSU's) honors program. Program staff emailed the recruitment materials to prospective participants. As I reflected on a meeting with my dissertation committee, I recalled informing them that the institution initially identified 15 possible participants, and my committee suggested I interview all or as many eligible participants as possible. When the program informed me that there might be a possibility of 35 participants, I took a very deep breath and carried forward. As reality hit with eight final responses, I became saddened at not being able to share more stories than those of just eight participants, knowing that the stories of the other possible participants were rich and deserved to be told.



More specifically, from that initial recruitment effort wherein there were 35 possible participants, 10 African American female honors program participants indicated interest in participating in the study, of which 8 actually participated in the study. An email was sent on my behalf to the prospective participants, and if they were interested, they were asked to complete an online survey to ensure their eligibility for the study. Once the prospective participants responded to the survey, I immediately followed up with them to ensure I did not lose the momentum of their eagerness. My follow-up email thanked them for their willingness to participate in the study and asked them to sign up online for an interview time (Appendix D).

### **Data Collection Methods and Procedures**

This study utilized the in-depth, semi-structured interview technique, because it encouraged me, the researcher, to be more specific regarding the questions asked (Rabionet, 2011). Moreover, this study was designed with open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to explore their journey to higher education and then to their honors program. Qualitative research, especially in social science settings, has continued to garner support because of the ability of the data to tell a full story (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Creswell (2007) asserted that a good researcher and her or his research project must state the assumptions, paradigms, and frameworks up front. This ensures the organization and flow of the research to be evident and offers a path for data analysis. The procedures to collecting qualitative data when examining a phenomenon must be systematic to ensure the data are collected and analyzed properly (Creswell, 2007).

Bleicher (1980) believed that it was naive for the interpreter to completely disassociate from the study, just as it is unrealistic to be in complete bliss and positivity with the texts.

Seidman's (2013) insight regarding the development of the phenomenology interview protocol provided me, as the researcher, with the guidance necessary to garner specific information about the participants' background. My utilizing of Seidman's in-depth interview format allowed the life history of these African American female participants to be fully exposed (Seidman, 2013). Accordingly, as mentioned, the participants were asked in-depth, open-ended questions to describe their own experiences through their responses (Seidman, 2013). Further, Seidman described lived experiences as "elements that are part of our experience that flow together, undifferentiated while we are in the stream of action" (p. 17); that is, these elements represent the description of the phenomena based upon the participants' words. One of the most salient aspects of the interview process with the participants was the transition that these women experienced in their life. The interview protocol asked the participants to reflect on their experiences growing up and the influencers that encouraged their academic strength.

Within phenomenological research, one of the most useful ways to garner information is to hold a series of interviews with participants. Seidman (2013) recommended a three-interview series to gain the richest information from the participants. Use of the three-interview series in this study allowed for the interviewer and interviewee to explore the experiences and their analysis together. Interview 1 was designed to establish the context of the participants' experience; Interview 2 allowed the participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the specific context of the

honors program; and Interview 3 encouraged the participants to reflect on the meaning of their honors program and life experiences (Seidman, 2013). This structure of the interview series was important to ensure that the data were gathered in a certain order. The structure was developed to respect both the participants' experience and my role as the researcher. I find this a salient point, because I interviewed African American college-going women, and as an African American woman whose career is in higher education, my passion is connecting with college students. Without the structured interview format, we might have bonded too much over their lived experience, and conversation could have strayed from the topic at hand.

According to Seidman's (2013) recommendation, the interview length in this study was 90 minutes for each segment and for each participant. To ensure trust would be built and that the participants were at ease during each stage of the process, we did not watch the clock nor put a time limit on the interviews (Seidman, 2013). I ensured that there was plenty of time in between each interview for going beyond our initial time slot. Within the three-interview process, it was also recommended that the interviews be spaced 3 days to 1 week apart. Such spacing of the interviews enabled the participants to reflect on experiences and the interview, while it also prevented me from becoming overwhelmed with the prospect of conducting, transcribing, and then interpreting perhaps dozens of interviews (Seidman, 2013).

During the course of the participant interviews, I found that they did not know the full structure of the honors program and I found that I needed to interview the associate director. I had not planned on interviewing him, so I had to go back to IRB for

permission to interview him. This interview took place over Skype and lasted approximately one hour. During the interview, I was able to ask him questions that filled in the gap with what the participants may not have known about the program. One of his passions is about continuing to open the doors of honors programs to more students of color. Our talk focused on his philosophies of honors programs and how the program at OSSU has evolved.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Phenomenology, according to van Manen (1990), “asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some-‘thing’ what it is—and without which it could not be what it is” (p. 10). The use of the interview guide and informational conversational interview allowed for the natural occurrence of conversation and for elements of the experience that might not seem relevant to become relevant. As the interviewer, I sought to learn about the world of the individual participants—to be allowed the honor of inquiring about their experience (Patton, 2002). The topic of African American women in collegiate honors programs and their experience is fascinating to me, and I looked forward to interviewing them to find out who these women were.

Although there are several methods of interviewing, I combined the interview guide and the informal conversational interview, as mentioned above. The combination of these two approaches allowed for the greatest flexibility, while maintaining a careful interview structure (Patton, 2002). It also allowed for follow-up questions to be utilized to gain further knowledge of the participant (Patton, 2002). Regarding the use of the three-interview approach referred to earlier, more specifically, the first interview sought

to understand the background of the participants and find out who they were before they chose to attend OSSU (Seidman, 2013). The second interview focused on the collegiate experience and the choice and reasoning behind choosing to be a part of the honors program (Seidman, 2013). The third and final interview allowed for the participants to further explore, explain, and reflect on their honors program experience (Seidman, 2013). Overall, the three-tiered interview structure allowed for the participants to recognize the significance and importance of their experience as an African American woman in a collegiate honors program.

Initial questions are outlined in Appendices F, G, and H, which reflect Interviews 1, 2, and 3, respectively. In alignment with the interview guide approach, the questions were open-ended, as stated earlier. This further allowed for a flow of natural and relaxed conversation, while ensuring the data were collected correctly. The flow of natural and relaxed conversation was important to me, because I wanted to ensure that the participants and I, as African American women, allowed for our time together to be unassuming. Interviews were recorded using QuickTime on a MacBook Pro, where the sound quality and accuracy were tested. Interviews were transcribed using a transcription service.

Understanding BFT and its five components gave me pause as I developed the questions and sequence for the interview process. With the realization that these women might feel as though they were outsiders, I was careful to utilize asset-based language versus deficit language in the questions (Hill Collins, 1991). For example, instead of

asking, “Is it difficult to be the only African American female in your classes?” I asked, “As an honor’s program participant, what is the classroom experience like at OSSU?”

This allowed the participant to reflect on her being an honors program participant within the classroom environment rather than focus on how others may perceive her within the classroom. Intellectual activism was also a key component in question development, because I wanted to ensure that the participants and in turn, the readers would know that it was not solely coincidence that led these women to their honors program (Hill Collins, 1991). It was hard work, perseverance, and the support of their community that assisted in getting them there.

The three-interview sequence required an investment of time by the participants as well as the researcher. Once the connection was made with the participants and consent was achieved, there was little delay in scheduling and then completing the interviews. The participants were successful college scholars, and so, scheduling our interview was in direct competition with their classes, class work, work-study, and other positions they held on campus and in their communities. These women’s schedules were so highly structured that some of their schedules were precise to each moment of the day.

After receiving IRB approval in fall 2016, interviews were held during February and March of 2017. The first interviews were all held in person, except for two; the second and third interviews were conducted over Skype. Scheduling the first interview went smoothly with most of the participants. There were two participants with whom I could not meet when I visited OSSU, so Skype was used for all three of their interviews. With the other participants being occupied almost 24 hours a day, it was difficult to

arrange their second and third interviews. Even though the Skype interviews were not ideal, the initial in-person interview with each participant was invaluable for us to make a connection with one another. Also, the Skype interview was a reasonable accommodation, because travel back to OSSU was not possible for me.

The in-person interviews were held over 2 days on the OSSU campus. Upon arrival to the campus, I quickly went into student survival mode: Find parking, be sure not to get a ticket or get towed, and get to the honors building on time. One thing I love about college campuses is the feeling of being lost for just a moment until things become familiar, and being on OSSU's campus was no different. The interview area, located in one of OSSU's newest residence halls, was a quiet study space with a small computer lab, lots of space for students to work, and private study rooms. The private study room that was reserved for us had large windows with lots of light. The tables and chairs in the room allowed for me to move them to make the room more suitable for an interview instead of a study session. As mentioned earlier, I was able to schedule the interviews back to back for 90 minutes each. This gave us time to meet, get to know one another, and dive into the interview questions. I found that 90 minutes was a suitable time to thoroughly go through the questions, even if some of the participants shared more than others.

**Environmental context for the interviews.** OSSU is a large PWI and considered the flagship institution in its state. It was founded in the late 1800s and currently has both the largest endowment of any institution in the United States and the largest enrollment of students in its state with an enrollment of more than 50,000 students. Being founded after

the Civil War and as the land-grant institution of the state, it has a long history of military service, which continues today. The student union is dedicated to those who served and gave their life to the United States. Another element of its history is that it is a leader in agriculture.

With OSSU's long history, the campus has a historical side with a grand entrance, and a newer side with a clock tower landmark. Once the interviews were completed on the second day, I set out to explore the campus. I found the campus to be inviting and very walkable. I much preferred walking through the campus to driving, because one can certainly go with the flow of students easier than navigating narrow campus streets. On many college campuses, the student union is a natural hub of activity. As I approached OSSU's student union, I noticed its formality and realized it was named a memorial student union to recognize fallen ROTC students who served in the military. For example, there were signs asking students not to walk on the grass because it is a memorial student union in memory of veterans and those who have given their lives in service. That theme continued throughout the building; for example, food was not allowed in the "living room" because this room displays many flags of the world, is a quiet study area, and serves as a place for students to gather. The history of OSSU is chronicled throughout the campus with statues, plaques, pictures that capture a time when the military and men dominated campus, and donated gifts from graduating classes to commemorate their time at OSSU. Without time to explore the campus, I would not have been able to further understand the deep connection the participants had to their campus.



The participants in this study did not know one another, or, they did not know if they were in the honors program or not. It may be difficult to understand that even on a large campus with a relatively small Black student population that these individuals did not know one another, but they did not. When these individuals were interviewed, they were relatively new to OSSU and simply may not have built their networks yet. Also, there are two honors residence halls at OSSU and depending on when and where the participants lived on campus, may also contribute to the fact that they did not formally know one another. Additionally, none of the participants were in the same academic discipline and therefore, they may have never taken one class together in their time at OSSU. Whatever the reason for the participants not knowing one another, it is something that deserves further understanding and analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Hermeneutical phenomenological analysis is tied to what is known as the hermeneutical circle or spiral, as discussed earlier. Kvale (1996) pointed out, “In the hermeneutical tradition this circularity is not viewed as a ‘vicious circle,’ but rather as a *circulus fructuosus*, or spiral, which implies the possibility of continuously deepened understanding of meaning” (p. 48). Kvale discussed seven canons or principles that must be utilized in interpreting hermeneutical phenomena. These canons assisted me with entering and exiting the circle through a clear and understandable path.

The first canon is the realization of the back-and-forth process between the parts and the whole. In this study, the circle allowed for ongoing analysis of the interviews, which meant that I reviewed the words of the participants many times to determine first

where the entrance of the circle was, and then the correct point at which to enter the circle. I chose to enter the hermeneutical circle through the participants' experience of being an African American woman. This point/section on the circle was chosen because of the significance of the intersectional relationship of their gender and race (Hill Collins, 1991). Thus, through the continued exploration of the interview process, an example of a hermeneutic circle was developed to depict the story of an African American woman participant of a collegiate honors program (Kvale, 1996).

Canons 2 and 3 deal with understanding when to end the interpretation process and the subsequent testing of those interpretations (Kvale, 1996). Coding the data enabled me to develop a pattern of the hermeneutic circle as well as summarize and find unity within the information. To me, the circle represented how the individual stories of the participants are tied to one another. For example, half of the participants are first-generation Americans whose parents emigrated from Africa. Although the first-generation American's circle may encompass different elements, their circle represents their journey in American higher education and an honors program. Canons 4 and 5 deal with the text and the continued understanding of the themes. The third canon moved me into the testing of my interpretations against the larger themes I was identifying through the data (Kvale, 1996). For example, if the finding were to show that the stories were not connected, this would impel me to return to the transcripts and continue reviewing my field notes and the interviews to look for differences or inconsistencies.

More specifically, the fourth canon requires that singular participant stories remained intact through the interpretation process (Kvale, 1996). The stories stand on

their own, as evidenced in the following chapters (Kvale, 1996). By detailing their personalities, the intonation of their voices, and their individual lived experiences, the stories represent a small portion of the African American women's experiences not only in honors programs but also within American higher education. This also deepened the autonomous meanings of interviews. It was important to keep the lives of the participants individual and distinct during the interpretation process. Canon 5 assists in bringing the previous four canons together to understand the themes of the text to ensure clear interpretation of the interviews (Kvale, 1996). The coding process or the identification of themes within the texts found the links between the interviews and provided a clear path for continued interpretation (Kvale, 1996).

Canons 6 and 7 focus on me as the researcher, ensuring bias and understanding were fluid and an ongoing task (Kvale, 1996). Kvale (1996) pointed out that in Canon 6, interpretations are not "presuppositionless," meaning that the researcher does not assume (before thorough review) what the data may indicate. Accordingly, the researcher must not only be conscious about presuppositions so as not to fully anticipate answers but also realize how she or he may unconsciously place meaning incorrectly (Kvale, 1996). The ongoing questioning and discussion regarding bias and understanding thus constitute the core of Canon 6. With this in mind, I was diligent in ensuring that I did not bring in assumptions about the participants or the study during the interpretation process.

The seventh canon connects understanding with innovation and creativity: "The researcher must understand that every time an understanding is realized, a clearer understanding has been brought forth" (Kvale, 1996, p. 48). For me as the researcher, this

was an exciting portion of the research, where understanding further brought me to the realization of the impact these women's lives have, through the sharing of their stories, on those who currently surround them and those who will come after them. Overall, these seven canons assisted with an understanding of the words spoken by the participants that created holistic stories (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Summary of Kvale's Canons Used in Interpreting Hermeneutical Phenomenology*

<b>Canon</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example Of</b>
Canon 1	Back and forth process	Initial coding process
Canon 2	Code patterns	I: influencers, F: factors, P: path, S: success/drive to succeed, L: lived experience/environment, B: Black, W: woman, H: honors, A: academics, E: expectations, O: opportunities, R: religion/faith
Canon 3	Testing text between participants	Relating the participants to one another.
Canon 4	Text standing on its own	Connecting the stories of the individuals to BFT.
Canon 5	Defining themes	Identifying the significance of the maternal influence of the participants as it relates to BFT.
Canon 6	Recognizing bias	Understanding that even though I as the researcher have knowledge of higher education, I need to stay within my understanding of their words, not my understanding.
Canon 7	Recognizing the innovation within the texts	Being aware that each time an interpretation occurs, there is continued understanding of the innovation.

Without an understanding of each part of the interview and the data analysis, these stories would not be complete, thus the continued dilemma of the hermeneutical circle or spiral (Schmidt, 2006). Regardless of how and where I entered the circle or spiral, my focus was to accurately portray the lived experiences of these women. As their researcher/interpreter, it was my responsibility to not only collect the data but also understand the parts of their lives that they shared with me and then place their stories in a context to share with others. My bias as an African American woman was analyzed throughout, as I recognized and compartmentalized educational and life experiences.

The canons, along with BFT, were a critical guide in interpreting the narratives of the participants to find a similar story between all of them. In addition to the narratives, profiles were also created to further examine the lives of these individuals (Seidman, 2013). Because the participants and I did not live in the same vicinity, I realized that building relationships with them through the interview process was essential, especially because relationships are key within African American culture (Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1981). Internalizing the canons listed above and ensuring that all of them were followed and fully utilized, I paid careful attention to the development and accuracy of the stories.

To code the transcripts, I utilized *in vivo* coding. *In vivo* coding was chosen to keep the voices of the participants separate but allowed me to find and develop the themes throughout the transcripts. Another aspect of *in vivo* coding that drew me to it was the term *emic*, which for me meant understanding the story without other external influences, such as other research on African American women in honors programs. Whereas the literature on African American women in honors programs is not abundant, the literature describing African American women in higher education could have influenced the coding process (Saldaña, 2016). *In vivo* coding is also strongly aligned with ensuring those from African American cultural backgrounds have the opportunity to tell their story from their perspective, which is also aligned with BFT.

The first rounds of coding entailed reviewing the interview transcripts line by line to understand what was most important to the participants (Saldaña, 2016). After conducting several rounds of the participant interviews and subsequent coding, I moved to coding the associate director interview. This coding process was different, because I

switched my thinking to that of a higher education administrator. The coding process evolved from how theory and practice intersected within the program to how the associate director and OSSU recognize that honors is not linear; that is, there are different honors opportunities at this university. Further understanding the role of BFT within the coding process allowed me to examine the dedication to inclusiveness and equity within the program. This point is salient because hermeneutic phenomenology serves to ensure the individualism of the participants (Hill Collins, 1991; Kvale, 1996; Saldaña, 2016; van Manen, 1990).

Coding within phenomenology assists the researcher with being able to focus on bringing forth the themes within the data (Patton, 2002). Assisting with finding and understanding the themes within the data is another process called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). An element that makes IPA powerful in phenomenology is that it asks me as the researcher to not only know the research of honors programs, but also ensure the participant understands her experience within the honors program itself (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). In other words, the participant is a part of the honors program, but is the honors program a part of the participant? IPA assists with further illuminating the voices of research participants, especially when voices such as theirs are not often researched. According to Larkin et al. (2006),

“It can seem sufficient to simply ‘collect’ and ‘represent’ these voices. But this oversimplifies the task of qualitative psychology, and undermines the potential of IPA to properly explore, understand and communicate the experience and viewpoints offered by its participants” (p. 103).

Furthermore, applicable to this study with its small sample size, “an IPA study typically involves a highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 103). Larkin et al. (2006) also pointed out that IPA reminds the researcher that the gathered data are but a small portion of the participant’s life, yet the information is rich and deserves close attention and care. These authors observed that another significant element within IPA is that it encourages the researcher to examine the *why* and *what* influences within the text. For example, if there were an ongoing mentioning of racial tensions, I, as the researcher, might look further into the interviews to see if there are connections to other underlying issues regarding the racial tensions rather than simply describing them (Larkin et al., 2006).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher, I worked to make sense of all the parts that make up the whole story (Patton, 2002). My work as the qualitative analyst tested my skills, ability, and tenacity of interpreting these texts toward a cohesive, accurate and well-told story (Patton, 2002). As an African American woman higher education administrator, I have never been a member of an honors society or an honors program. Although I have familiarity with Black cultural norms as well as trends within higher education, I have not personally experienced academic undergraduate life in over 25 years. Through the interview process, I learned about an entirely new world of education and those who thrive within it.



Milner (2007) argued that students of color are relegated to a different norm of education than that of their White peers. This often means that beginning at an early age, they are tracked towards remediation and therefore not placed in advanced or mainstream classrooms (Milner, 2007). Additionally, Milner emphasized that regardless of the color of the researcher, the researcher must consider her or his own racial identity before researching that of others. For this reason, I used Milner's framework of researcher racial and cultural positionality to better position myself within the research, which assisted in understanding the racial and cultural knowledge that I encountered. Milner also discussed how it could be an advantage or a disadvantage for the researcher to be of the same background as that of the participants. Through Milner's framework, my racial identity did not hinder the process of this research; rather it enhanced the stories of these women by my being aware that though our racial identity may be similar, we are not, and must not be expected to be the same.

Milner (2007) made it clear within the framework that it is designed to guide researchers through "seen, unseen, and unforeseen dangers in the practice of their inquiry: researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system" (p. 395). For me, the reflective process involved my answering two sets of questions before I began the interview process with the participants. The questions are similar to the racial autobiography that is a standard assignment completed by many doctoral students in our program. The following is a sample of the questions, along with my answers:

*What is my racial and cultural heritage? How do I know?* I am an African American woman with no siblings, born to Carolyn McAfee Lindsey, a math teacher and then a principal, and Walter Van Lindsey, who spent much of his career as a history teacher. I was reared in Houston, Texas and found myself living in Denver, Colorado, after an amazing experience at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, a historically Black college. I know I am African American because that is all I know; I know no other heritage but my own. I am uniquely African American, because I remember the smells of my youth as being pig's feet, pinto beans, Texas BBQ, and of course, large family gatherings.

*In what ways do my racial and cultural backgrounds influence how I experience the world, what I emphasize in my research, and how I evaluate and interpret others and their experiences? How do I know?* I see the world as an African American female educator. My world is further informed by the fact that I do not have children, yet I ensure other people's children receive the best education they possibly can. My research is exciting to me, because I know how many simply brilliant African American women are in America that will (perhaps) never have the opportunity to develop their intelligence. This may be for many reasons: their upbringing, the education they received, test scores, their having children at a young age, or even fear. Whatever their reason, their full potential is not realized. My prayer is that this research not only keeps young Black girls on the path to brilliance but also recognizes that many others have the same potential if not more.

*What racialized and cultural experiences have shaped my research decisions, practices, approaches, epistemologies, and agendas?* The racialized experiences that are informing this research are relatively recent. As an African American woman, I have experienced not being served in restaurants and not being properly greeted at businesses—those are experiences that I believe many in the African American community have experienced. It was not until I entered my doctoral program that I truly became thankful for my first advisor in the program. I entered what I believed to be a utopia of educated intellectuals. My cohort was diverse and a little batty, and yet perfect. As the program changed, so did my assigned advisor. My second advisor and I did not connect in the way I was used to in my life. For the first time in the program, I was lost, and I did not know why. It is now, upon this reflection, that I question what happened within this relationship, or more accurately, partnership. There must have been questions that I did not ask or things that my advisor did not tell me that prevented the relationship from becoming stronger. I believe that one of the turning points was when my advisor asked if I were going to become a professor, and I responded no, that I wanted to stay in administration because I really enjoy what I do. I wonder if my advisor believed that if students chose to be in this doctoral program, those of color needed to be compelled to go into a faculty role. I say this because from my observation, my advisor guided those who sought a faculty role versus those who chose to remain in administration. Again, that is my observation—one that influenced my current approach of ensuring that all are welcome, regardless of where they are guiding their own life. Being a community college administrator, I want everyone to earn a 4-year degree; however, that is not what

everyone wants or needs. My role is to ensure they receive the best education they possibly can and that the proper support is there for them to succeed.

The second set of questions turns away from me as the researcher and begins focusing on the research participants, beginning with the question, *What are the cultural and racial heritage and the historical landscape of the participants in the study? How do I know?* Responding to this question prior to conducting the interviews, my answer, presented below, reflects my own personal experience and knowledge. Thus, it was my perception that their racial and cultural backgrounds would have greatly influenced how they experience the world, especially those who are first-generation Americans. Their background has the benefit of two different worlds, whereas the participants who were solely from America did not have the benefit of such knowledge. For those whose parents were from Africa, their lens on academics would most likely have come from a place of being grounded in family. I perceived I would be able to confirm this response during the interviews when the participants discussed the importance of their family and how their families shaped their educational path.

A subsequent question that focused more on the participants was, *How do I negotiate and balance my own interests and research agendas with those of my research participants, which may be inconsistent with or diverge from mine? How do I know?* I planned to negotiate this balance by having to set myself apart from the participants. I reminded myself that I would be finding out about them, and my role was not to insert myself into their daily life; I was a visitor in their lives.

## **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Often within evaluation of qualitative research, quantitative evaluation methods are utilized (Krefting, 1991). For many years, qualitative research was not considered to be rigorous (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). To better evaluate qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1986) developed a rubric for credibility and trustworthiness. To ensure trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba suggested the following criteria:

1. Prolonged engagement – “lengthy and intensive contact with the phenomena (or respondents) in the field to assess possible sources of distortion and especially to identify salencies in the situation” (p. 18);
2. Persistent observation – “in-depth pursuit of those elements found to be especially salient through prolonged engagement” (p. 18);
3. Triangulation – “cross-checking of the data with data from different sources, methods, and at times, different investigators” (p. 18);
4. Peer debriefing – “the exposing of oneself to a disinterested professional peer to keep the inquirer honest, assist in developing a working hypothesis, develop and test the merging design, and obtain emotional catharsis” (p. 19);
5. Member checks – the process of  
  
continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator’s reconstruction of what he or she has been told or otherwise found out and to be the constructions offered by other respondents or sources, and a terminal, formal testing of the final case report with a representative sample of stakeholders. (p. 18)

For the purposes of this study, the series of three interviews served as the prolonged contact with the participants and provided valuable insight into to the lives and

personalities of the participants. The ideal situation regarding prolonged observation occurred through my visiting OSSU and experiencing where participants engage on a daily basis with their honors peers and program staff and faculty. Member checking was also conducted with the participants by providing them with their interview transcripts and requesting feedback to ensure their account of their life experiences was accurate. I also solicited feedback from peers and faculty to further ensure that the data were consistent with what my study was researching and that I did not veer off track.

As an African American woman, I debriefed with my peers, who also identified as African American and female, to further ensure that I positioned myself as a researcher within the process and not a participant. I say “not as a participant” because I believe that my life experiences and the experiences of the participants could have been similar, and I did not want to blur the lines of where research and life begin and end. To further assist with my positionality, I collected field notes, along with observations, to assist with developing a complete phenomenological detail for a detailed audit to be performed if necessary.

### **Study Delimitations**

The decision to study the experience of African American women in collegiate honors programs was developed from a question regarding students of color in honors programs. As has been discussed, there is limited research on honors programs and the students within these programs. Therefore, there is not significant information on the students of color within the programs. Researching the programs themselves was considered; however, such research would not be able to accurately describe the

experiences of the students within the programs. Thus, I decided to narrow the focus to African American women and their experiences. Accordingly, the questions were focused on the experiences of the African American women in honors programs and their educational journey in becoming part of a collegiate honors program.

### **Positionality and Biases**

My experience within higher education led me to seek a doctorate degree, and my research led me to seek an understanding of a student population that is not often researched. Considering positionality, I ensured that my own biases and lived experiences were not projected onto the participants; and furthermore, I did not make assumptions on what I perceived to be their experiences. As the researcher, I sought to describe experiences based purely on the trust that the participants privileged me with. As both an African American woman who has achieved several higher education degrees and as a professional within higher education, I reflected on what the researcher-participant relationship would be between me and the participants (Bourke, 2014).

The participants and I shared similar characteristics. We identified as African American and female and have attended a college or university in the United States. Where we differed was that I had never been a member of a collegiate honors program. My identity as a higher education administrator professional in retention assisted this research, because I was seeking to know more about the success of these women and how they might be able to help the next generation of educated Black girls.

In Chapter 5 I utilized song lyrics by African American female artists to further tell the story of the participants. This was an important element for me to bring into the

research because it assisted in ensuring the tenets and themes were linked, and I believed that the influence of music would be able to bring in the passion for how the participant's stories were being told. The influence of music in the African American community has been important since the time of slavery and can be seen through Negro Spirituals (Brown, 1953; Campbell, 2002). Those spiritual roots can be seen through the writings of Hill Collins and how she included the writings of Black women whose voices have not largely been documented in mainstream culture (Hill Collins, 2000). I sought to continue to pull upon those roots by creatively introducing songs into further telling the story of the participants. It was important for me to do so because I felt that by solely telling their story through words would have been inadequate.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 reviewed the methodology used to analyze the data for the study, the recruitment procedures and how the researcher positioned herself to collect and then analyze the data. As the chosen methodology, hermeneutics provided the structure to interpret the collected data. Additionally, hermeneutics allowed the researcher to become a part of the analysis. By not having to set herself apart from the analysis, the researcher was able to better connect with the data which strengthened the analysis. The analysis was strengthened because of the identity of the participants and the researcher. In connecting the identities of the participants and the researcher through the lenses of BFT and hermeneutics, careful attention was paid to how the data were collected.



## CHAPTER FOUR. THE INFINITE EIGHT

Chapter 4 fuses together the data collected during the in-depth interviews with the African American women honors program participants who chose to share their stories for this hermeneutical study with me. The primary research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What are the academic paths experienced by African American women that have prepared them for entrance and success within a collegiate honors program?
2. What are the lived experiences of African American women who currently are or recently have been enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program?

As the number of matriculating African American female students has increased at PWIs in the United States, the intentional work to ensure these students experience an inclusive and supportive college experience has also become purposeful and an embedded focus in higher education (Allen et al., 1991). This purposeful work has contributed to retaining students of color at a higher rate and improving the experience of African American students at a PWI (Allen et al., 1991). Even though such efforts have improved the academic experiences of African American students at PWIs, the work is far from done. African American students may continue to feel isolated, are less academically successful than their White counterparts, and may deal with racial issues

that impact their college experience (Allen et al., 1991). My interviews with these incredibly talented honors program participants serve not only higher education, but also honors programs specifically, to further understand the life and educational needs of their students. Chapter 4 provides the reader with the her stories of the eight undergraduate participants who openly shared their vivid and impactful stories with me. These participants shared their educational journey that led them to OSSU and explained how their journeys impact them now as they navigate their undergraduate careers. I have named them “the Infinite Eight” because their possibilities are limitless and because when the number eight is horizontal, its symbol also represents infinity.

### **Chapter Organization**

Reflecting upon the literature regarding African American women and how their experiences are cataloged (or not), especially as they relate to higher education, I struggled with how to tell their stories as individuals and yet as women who shared this common experience as it related to their participation in the honors program at OSSU. As has been discussed, American higher education has treated African American women as if they were invisible or super-invisible (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007), and that further ensured that I took great care in sharing their stories. In this chapter, I share their stories through a narrative format that brings forth not only their stories but a part of their amazing #BlackGirlMagic spirit. As each participant is introduced, her African name (a pseudonym), along with its meaning and the name’s region of origin is provided. Researching these names was a particularly meaningful portion of this process, because it took me longer than I expected to solidify their names. Once I began reviewing the

narratives, I changed a few names because their meanings simply did not fit with whom I believed them to be, after hearing their stories. Preliminary participant information is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

*Preliminary Participant Information*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>1<sup>st</sup>- Generation To Attend College</b>	<b>Immigrant Family</b>	<b>Gifted &amp; Talented</b>
Eshe	Sophomore	Education	No	Yes	No
Amara	Graduate	Industrial systems engineering	Yes	Yes	No
Amani	Freshman	Chemical engineering with minors in chemistry, mathematics, and international engineering	Yes	No	No
Issa	Sophomore	Accounting	No	No	No
Kali	Sophomore	Political science with history minor	No	No	Yes
Fayola	Sophomore	Petroleum engineering	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mandisa	Junior	Biology major, computer science minor; Interdisciplinary studies: math and science	No	No	No
Ramla	Senior	Biology major, computer science minor	No	Yes	Yes

## The Narratives

### **Eshe (Definition: Life Energy – Origin: East Africa)**

Eshe is one of the gentlest souls I have ever met. She had a light and spark of determination that I do not often notice when meeting someone for the first time. Born on America's East Coast to Ghanaian parents who were educated in Ghana and the United States, she has a perspective of life and education that few have. She embraces both her African and African American heritages, which has provided her with the balance she needs for success. She is empowered by the stories of her immigrant family and by the stories of those who fought for civil rights in America. She understands that there was struggle before her time, and even though there is struggle now, she works to make that struggle a little less burdensome for future students.

Her maternal grandparents educated their five children at a Ghanaian boarding school because they sought to ensure the success of their children, their children's children, and future generations. She witnessed firsthand the impact that education has had on her and her family. Her grandparents sacrificed to ensure her aunts and uncles received the best education possible by sending them to boarding school. Eshe's Ghanaian heritage reminds her everyday how important her family is, now and always. In Ghanaian culture, the family stays together, and as the generations age, the children take care of their elders. From Eshe's description of how important her family is to her, she is looking forward to supporting her family for many years to come.

After her parents divorced, she, her brother, her mom, and her extended family (grandmother, aunt, aunt's two children, and grandfather) all moved across the country

into one home. With her maternal grandparents living in the house, she continued to soak up the passion that they had for education. With a house full of family, she saw herself as the encourager. She saw the influence that she had over her cousins as they witnessed her success. Her cousins have also set their sights on attending OSSU because of Eshe's impact on their lives. According to the United States definition, she is considered a first-generation college student; however, because of her family's educational attainment in Ghana, she has been able to navigate higher education more easily than some. The focus on education from her entire family assisted her in wanting to learn beyond the book. During our conversation, she indicated that she chose OSSU because she wanted to be challenged academically. Eshe explained,

That's why it's not easy, because our professors can really tell when they give us our tests or in class who's really reading the book, who's really taking the time to understand the material and take it a step further than just what comes straight from the textbook.

From an early age, Eshe knew that she wanted to be a doctor, and in high school, she took Advanced Placement Chemistry to prepare for college. The chemistry class was one of the most difficult, and it frustrated her throughout the semester. Even though it was difficult, she learned, and she successfully completed the course. She left that course with a strengthened understanding of what she would need to do to be successful in college, which is in reference to her quote above.

Eshe indicates that she did not do anything special to prepare to enroll in OSSU's honors program; yet, without realizing it, she did. For example, in high school, her

teachers provided study guides; in college, she found that she must make her own. She utilized the knowledge she gained from her family and from her high school experiences to serve as the foundation for her success. Building on her work ethic from high school led her to try honors, and she has found it to be a rewarding experience because it allowed her to “take a step beyond the classroom.” She has not waited for her education to influence her: She has influenced her own education by pushing and challenging herself through the honors program. She also realizes this will assist her as she enters medical school. As mentioned earlier, she believes that she did not do anything special to enter the honors program, commenting,

I mean, I didn't do any books or courses or anything besides the ones that I took at my high school. So to prepare for the honors program, I guess was just going to high school and graduating, and I didn't really do anything beyond that.

Whether she believes it or not, she prepared herself very well for the honors program.

In asking her if she felt she was prepared academically for her college experience, she answered with a resounding “no.” Despite that fact, she was excelling not only academically but also socially. Like several of the other participants, Eshe's friends were just as ambitious as she was. For all of them to be successful in college, the boundaries they set for themselves allowed them to balance their social and academic life and be successful in college. Being grounded by her family has given her the confidence to know not only that others are looking to her for guidance, but also how important it is to be aware of her surroundings and continue to be that encourager. When she sees students from visiting high schools on campus, she makes it a point to introduce herself to them so

those students who may think they do not have a place at OSSU know that they do, and that her success may be their success.

When Eshe spoke about her faith in God, her voice calmed and her presence grew even fuller. She understands that her goals are the ones that God has set forth for her. One of those goals is that she is on this Earth to touch people and to serve a higher purpose. Eshe is grounded in the fact that others have sacrificed so that she can be a student at OSSU, explaining,

I know that about sixty years ago this might not have been possible or might not have even been a thought . . . [it] reminds me to keep going and to motivate myself, that people fought for my place to be here, people fought for my seat and that I do belong here.

**Amara (Definition: Great Strength – Origin: West Africa)**

Amara was one of the two participants whom I did not have the pleasure of meeting in person, because we met over Skype. I feared that meeting participants online instead of in person might diminish the connection that the two of us had with one another. I found Amara's story to be one of the most intriguing, because as a recent graduate of OSSU, she provided the perspective of one who had taken advantage of many opportunities at OSSU and its honors program. During the interview process, she reflected on her experiences in the honors program and what impact these experiences had on her life. I was taken with how strong Amara's spirit was, and I was reassured that nothing, not even technology, could diminish her fire. Amara and I met at a particularly happy time in her life. She had just finished her master's program (she had taken her last

final the day before) in engineering at a prestigious university on the West Coast, was starting a new position in Chicago, and was to be married in a few short weeks. Her pseudonym, Amara, means Possesses Great Strength, and as you read her narrative, you will see how perfectly this name suits her.

Born in Nigeria, she and her family immigrated to the United States when she was about six. During her first few years in America, she found it difficult to fit in because of her thick accent, and she felt that she was treated differently by her teachers. Perhaps they could not see past her accent or how difficult it must have been for a child to transition into a new country. These experiences fed her need to not only fit in but also show that those around her did not have the privilege of determining her future, only she did. As she continued to progress through her education, she became obsessed with school. She described this passion as follows: “I don’t know, I guess like somewhere, somehow I was a kid that decided that like if I worked really hard, I could do what I wanted to do.” In high school, her teachers took notice of her hard work and asked her if she might be interested in engineering. That interest and those questions from educators who saw her passion and potential about her future ignited another spark that further fueled her desire to achieve. These questions were the reason she continued to excel academically and set her on a course that ensured she would become an engineer.

The junior and senior year of high school for many students are complete with college visits, career exploration, and answering the question of what is next. And for Amara, because she was graduating from high school, this was no different. Amara continued to excel in her studies, and she was accepted by several Ivy League institutions



and was also granted scholarships that would have left her mostly debt-free after graduation. She was not only confident of her college future, she was also excited. With life, challenges often appear at the most inopportune time. As Amara prepared for high school graduation, she found out that she was an undocumented immigrant. This fact did not stop her trajectory to college; it simply moved it to OSSU, because her academic accomplishments provided her with educational options. OSSU recognized her talent regardless of her immigrant status, and she received a full tuition scholarship.

Her OSSU and honors program experiences continued to shape her as a woman, and particularly as an African American woman. Throughout the interview, Amara returned to how impactful being an immigrant to the United States was for her. She was different. Her hair was different, her accent was different, she stood out because of being a woman and having beautiful dark skin—she was different. Being different greatly impacted her, especially with regard to being enrolled in a conservative PWI like OSSU. As she progressed through her undergraduate education, she found that there was a distinct difference between blending in and not being seen at all. The difference she found was that she could not avoid being seen. Reflecting on her experience living in the honors residence hall, she said,

And at one point, someone wrote a racial epithet on my door in the honors dorm.

It hurt, it hurt a lot. And not only that, but the reaction of other people to what had happened was just kind of like, “Oh you know, okay whatever, we’ll take care of it; try to figure it out.” Like it wasn’t a thing. So yeah my Black womanness was huge at OSSU, and I think also just like again the fact that I always wanted to

blend so much, thinking back on it now, I guess I'm like, I should have just been me as much as I could have been and just not worried about all of that, but you know.

The minimum amount of time OSSU honors students are asked to reside in the honors residence hall is 1 year; however, Amara decided to become an advisor during her sophomore year and continue residing in the hall. This was a very personal choice for her, because she sought to give back to OSSU and its honors program and be a support for the next class of honors students, especially for the ones who might look like her.

The OSSU environment was challenging for Amara, yet it showed her that she had the strength within her to accomplish all her goals. She explained, "You have to stand alone. You have to be able to stand strong and just be emotionally strong, as often we're the only ones." Amara, a first-generation college student and first-generation American, saw that she was different and chose to blend into her surroundings, trying very hard not to be noticed. However, that was impossible, impossible because her light and her drive, and realistically, the color of her skin would not allow that to happen. Her inner strength and her quest to achieve would not allow her to fail nor give up. Yes, she often felt like she did not belong at OSSU because of her fellow students' backgrounds, because their parents were lawyers, doctors, and business professionals, and their parents sometimes were also OSSU alumni. At first, she viewed that as a barrier to her own success, but she knew that members of her family, especially siblings and younger cousins, were watching her rise, and this pride carried her. Many first-generation college students sometimes get lost in the process of education, and like other first-generation

students, Amara did not have the guidance or knowledge that non-first-generation students have. In choosing her major she said,

Even thinking of it, like how I chose my college major, like I had no idea. I think I just picked. Like I didn't have anything, like I just you know, I just went with it, and like you know, you know God was like you know really helped in, you know. And where I am now, but like I had no clue. So, I think like just knowing like the path I walk and you know, with not being documented for a long time, and just being able to know that I was able to still achieve this, I think like really means a lot to me. And like, and I think also it is such a reminder because I know that I work hard but I also know that like my level of working hard is not all that got me here.

She “just picked” industrial engineering and conquered it—that is a gift.

**Fayola (Definition: Walks With Honor – Origin: West Africa)**

The moment Fayola walked into our interview session, she captured my fascination. As this tall, confident woman began to speak, I continued to realize that sharing these stories was exactly what I was supposed to be doing. I am sharing the stories of African American women who are not only succeeding but also thriving in their educational experiences, stories that need to be told more often because they are more common than society believes.

Fayola, too, has African heritage, because both of her parents are from Nigeria. When she was younger, she said that she was teased for being African. As our worldview has changed, so has teasing; and by the time she got to high school, she was cool for

being African. She found that her heritage was a plus and that people wanted to be with her and know more about her. After coming to the States in the 1980s (father) and 1990s (mother), her parents had five children and worked to instill the values of education and hard work in them. Her friends believed that she had strict (African) parents, however, she says that her parents were nothing but supportive, especially her mother. The expectations of achievement were clear, and she and her siblings lived up to her family's expectations.

Fayola is one of the few participants who were identified as gifted and talented and participated in gifted and talented programs through high school. She said that education came easy to her, and she took advantage of that by taking harder classes that pushed her towards success. When elements come easy to some individuals, they may not think about how or why it happens, but they embrace it and maximize their talents, and I think this is part of Fayola's story as well. She explained, "At first I didn't really think it [being in a gifted and talented program] was a big deal." She continued to talk about how she was moved to another elementary school to ensure she received the support her mind needed. Her elementary school provided the time and freedom to explore her strengths and helped her find her way to engineering. Once she found engineering, she relaxed into becoming an involved individual and always pushed herself to excel academically. Similar to other participants, she is still close with the friends she met in elementary school.

Fayola was a girl scout, a cheerleader, and student body president of her high school her senior year, all the while continuing to succeed in the gifted and talented

program. While in middle school, as she moved toward high school, her academic strength enabled her to take Algebra II. This is approximately two years earlier than what other students may experience. As mentioned earlier, she capitalized on her ability to easily understand and grasp material by taking harder courses and not taking the easy way out. During her senior year, instead of leaving after lunch as her colleagues did, she stayed at school and took Advanced Placement Chemistry as preparation for college. By taking Spanish III in high school, she ensured that her Spanish college courses would be like refresher courses, and this enabled her to focus on engineering. Fayola's intentional work to prepare for college by taking advantage of her ability to learn material quickly and her good study habits helped make it possible for her to major in petroleum engineering and join the honors program.

Fayola is comfortable being herself. She is attending a PWI, is a participant in the honors program, and is a petroleum engineering major, with one of her career goals being to work on an oil drilling rig. She has been the "only" African American and only African American woman in spaces most of her life, and she has chosen to continue to be in that space. About this she says,

So I know drilling is not something that many women do because of like the work hours in the schedule doesn't, isn't very compatible for like having a life. But I'm not really concerned about that right now. I just want to do what I want to do.

She does not measure her life based on her hardships but the blessings she has had throughout her journey. She observed, "I don't think I'd be in the same place if the world was like equal and we're all seen as equals." In understanding Fayola's words through

BFT, her story is that the world is unequal, but she has made it work for her. She realizes that she deserves to be in this space as much as any other individual, despite the history of this country. Her self-definition is to be present, be the best, and be comfortable in any situation.

Whereas many students have no idea about their future, Fayola is laser focused and is enjoying her hard work and her academic strengths. Her focus is also to make sure she is attractive to graduate programs and engineering firms. She is ensuring that she will be recognized for going above and beyond while she has the time. When asked why she became part of the honors program, she said, “Why not? Why not see where that takes me?” Yes, indeed, let us see where it takes you.

**Mandisa (Definition: Sweetness – Origin: South Africa)**

Upon first sight, Mandisa was one of the softest-spoken participants, because she is a thoughtful and internal thinker. Mandisa is the only participant who grew up in a small town of 4,000 people and attended only one school from first grade until she graduated from high school—that is how small her town was. This experience is critical in her story, because she did not have culture shock as she entered OSSU. She was used to being one of the few African Americans because of her experience growing up.

Without the distraction of culture shock to process through, Mandisa tapped into her inner strength through OSSU’s environment and within the supportive structure of the honors program. Some participants for this study have referenced being the only and not feeling as if they fit in. That is not the case for Mandisa. Even though OSSU is large and the African American students are few, she does not feel alone. In her words, “Being a

student you know, sometimes people think that you're left behind because there's so many students here. But with all the traditions and all the activities, it's hard to be left behind." She applied to be a counselor for the freshman orientation program but was not selected. That was not necessarily a disappointment to her, because she indicated that it was not a bad thing that she was not selected. It reminded her to continue finding her place at OSSU.

As Mandisa continued to work to find her extracurricular niche, she found the honors program by accident, she said. She had applied for a program that feeds into the honors program, and without that initial program, she may never have found honors. This quiet African American woman found a place where her voice was not only heard but also valued. The program realized that simply because there were not words coming out of her mouth did not mean she was not thinking. It proved the opposite: It validated her quiet voice by providing the intellectual stimulation she needed as well as making her large PWI feel smaller.

In today's world, our younger generation questions, *What is race? What is ethnicity?* and Mandisa is no different in her development of self. She identifies as an African American woman; however, she resists the act of placing herself in a box. She simply sees herself as a person—a strong, caring, and supportive person. Regardless of how she sees herself, she realizes the world may see her differently. She has experienced microaggressions at OSSU, and the way she deals with them is not unlike that of other African Americans: She works harder. When asked if she was prepared for college, she

said her high school did a good job preparing her academically but may not have been equipped to help her effectively navigate the racial situations. She explained,

Another thing that I'd say is a struggle is, for the most, part people are very open but you still run across some people that may not be as open, and it's not blatant, not sure how to word this. It's not necessarily blatantly prejudiced, but sometimes you think they are treating me a little bit differently than other people, and so you run into that sometimes but not too much.

When working through racial issues, especially between Black and White Americans, the language often moves to White Americans doing their own work instead of having the Black Americans make concessions. Doing the work is in reference to White Americans taking on the responsibility of learning about and understanding the lingering effects of racism. Mandisa's upbringing in being one of the only ensured that she would not forget her responsibility of understanding nor the responsibility of others to understand the impact of racism in the American educational system.

By not placing herself in a box, she was free to move in and out of social and academic circles where other students may not be comfortable. One of her prominent circles is the honors program. The honors program has helped her become a stronger organizer, and she has gained confidence by being in the program. With the additional work that honors calls for, she has had to ensure her success by staying on top of assignments and being organized. Thankfully, she felt prepared for the honors program, because she has been able to balance the additional workload. As students enter the honors program (and college, for that matter), the knowledge that they can succeed is



crucial for their successful matriculation. She underestimated herself when she first began the program and quickly found out that she was well qualified to be sitting in those honors seats.

Referring to her small town and being comfortable with her transition to OSSU, she embraced all that OSSU had to offer, such as participating in freshman orientation, playing club tennis, finding friend groups, and being involved. She is not isolated and refuses to leave her college experience on the table. Taking 18 credits at OSSU does not mean not having a strong social life. One of the drawbacks she talks about is not having much interaction with other African American women. Although she mentions that she does not need that interaction all the time, she appreciates it when it does happen. The interaction that students of color have with one another is important as they settle into their college life at a PWI. Often, when students feel they do not have the community they need, they allow their college experience to be interrupted or completely stopped because of the adjustment challenges (Allen et al., 1991). Interestingly, Mandisa believed that she would have fewer interactions with African American women in honors. Even if her interactions have been few, they have been meaningful. As an internal processor, she has enjoyed the intellectual conversations and the critical thinking experiences she has had in the program. She made this observation:

Before being in the Honors Program, I wanted to do well and perform well at school but I'm not sure I was shooting for as high as a GPA as I am now. Now I'm shooting for a 4.0. But before, I was just trying to get by, and also I had not thought about graduate school in a lot of detail. I got into the program, and I

realized I may be able to actually do this. I didn't think I could before; and being in Honors, I have a lot more resources that were able to help me and talk to me about different programs I can do after [undergraduate] school; so I think now I'm really considering graduate school, whereas before, I would've probably not given it a second thought.

This internal thinker and soft-spoken woman notices and processes everything around her. Her belief is that she is stronger when quiet. Despite her quiet nature, she has found communities to connect with on campus, because she sought them out. She connected with communities that would be accepting of her and where she could thrive; and so far in her time at OSSU, she has not had negative experiences. This may be due to her internal thinking and observation. She observed and learned where she would thrive, and one of those programs that supports her is honors.

**Issa (Definition: God is Salvation – Origin: South Africa)**

Issa was the first participant I interviewed, and she and I had the longest conversation of any of the participants. She is bouncy and energetic, and of all the participants, she told some of the best stories. Her chosen major is accounting, and I could tell that she had found her calling because she described people and their attributes very precisely. For example, in describing her background, she stated, “My father is half Black, half White, which makes me a fourth White, and my mother is full Black.” As we continued talking about the diversity of the people she interacted with at OSSU, she wanted to make sure (if she could) to include the entire racial and ethnic composition of a person of color. Speaking of the honors residence hall, she said, “There were only two

Black people, and one of the guys I think he was only like either only half or a fourth Black, and he looked mostly Hispanic/Asian because like he was Thai.” As our youth are questioning the role, checking a box in reference to race/ethnicity, I believe Issa wants to ensure that her circle knows that not only does she see their race/ethnicity, but also she honors all the pieces that make them whole.

Issa’s father is an ordained minister with an earned doctorate in ministry, and her mother received her bachelor’s degree and chose to stay home with her children to homeschool them. Her parents, and particularly her mother, sought to make sure that her education occurred in a nurturing environment. Issa and her brother were homeschooled until they graduated from high school, mostly because that provided the stability they needed as a family who relocated several times. Her parents wanted to ensure consistency in their children’s education; so although they sacrificed moving their family, their children’s education would not change, which was critically important in Issa’s development. As with the other participants, her parents found that balance of not pushing too much and being supportive so that Issa could thrive. Their support and encouragement through her education meant that she earned a 31-composite score on her ACT, which helped to earn her a full-tuition scholarship to OSSU.

Coming from a tight-knit, God-fearing African American family, Issa was prepared academically and socially for OSSU. Growing up, she became confident in who she was and what she could do. When she arrived at OSSU, she wrestled with seeing her fellow students wear “Make America Great Again” hats and brushed off the fact that she was not given a flyer in the student union because she believes those giving out the flyers

saw that she was African American. Growing up in a mostly white environment has helped Issa to adjust to college life. Regardless of the type of environment she experienced growing up, she must still wrestle with being an African American at a PWI. She commented,

I get nervous every time I see a Make America Great Again hat. Like OK, they're going to come at me like or are they going to yell in my face. I mean, there's a couple microaggressions here and there but nothing to write home about really. But I know other people have faced things. My certain classes where professors may say something, but that's usually not in the business school but more in the liberal arts areas, which is very interesting; you wouldn't think that.

OSSUs African American student population is just over 3.6%, and even though the numbers are not huge, Issa is grateful to be in the OSSU community with them. She gave this explanation:

For me, going to an HBCU [historically Black college or university] would have been incredibly strange and an entirely new experience for me because I've never really been around that many Black people in my life, and people like almost no Black people, like this is the most Black people I've been with in my entire life.

So, I'm happy, you know?

The honors program has provided Issa with experiences that students who are not in the honors program may never have. For example, an element that many students dread is group work. Issa says that being in the honors program has made group work not a chore because her group members pull their weight. Honors is also allowing her to

share her love of finance with the community, because she will facilitate financial literacy workshops in the communities that surround OSSU. The honors program is so laid back, she said, that it is easy for her to forget she is in it.

**Kali (Definition: Energetic – Origin: East Africa)**

Kali was the only participant who was raised mostly on the East Coast. She and her family moved when she was in the fourth grade because of her father's job. Through our conversation, moving during her fourth-grade year was a turning point for her because this is when she entered into the gifted and talented program at her elementary school. Her mother ensured that she would be able to excel academically and carefully chose a school that would nurture Kali's academic strengths. Kali's fourth-grade teacher and her class significantly shaped who she is becoming today. She says that her friends from that year are still her friends today, and they are socially and academically supportive of one another. In other words, they are a tight group and they keep one another accountable. Kali recalled,

So um, yeah, my momma used to joke with me, like your little group is kind of exclusive. Like if ya'll don't make the grades, you may not be part of this group.

So I put the pressure on myself and like my friends, we always just did like a good job, like if someone was slacking, we ask, "What's going on with you?"

Kali's experience on the East Coast provided her with the understanding and appreciation of African American culture in the United States. When she visited OSSU, she was captivated by how friendly the campus was and how everyone spoke to her and was welcoming. She feels accepted at OSSU but is very much aware of the nuances of

race and its impact in America and how that is impacting her collegiate experience. Kali commented,

People like warned me, like oh you might need to be careful, especially with like your views and everything. And I was like, honestly, I kind of like a challenge. So I was like, if I can go to this school because hey if I get into government, I'm going to face it anyway. So I guess I like being able to talk to people with different views, because I think that's a problem with our society, that we always yell at each other. So if you always hang out with people with your same views, that's not going to solve anything. So I guess I kind of looked at it from that standpoint too. People were kind of like oh what are you going to do with all those Trump supporters. And I'm like, honestly, love them too.

Similar to other African American students at a PWI, differing opinions of race have confronted Kali, and because she is comfortable in her skin, comfortable with being an African American at OSSU, and because she chose to attend this school, she is not afraid to not only confront but also engage and surprise her counterparts in the difficult conversations of race. She explained this as follows:

I kind of like surprising people. Sometimes, since I'm the only Black person, like when you say something like, I don't know, like when you say something smart, people are like, "I hate that like she's a smart Black girl or whatever." But that has come up before, and you're like, "Hey yea, I'm a smart girl, and I'm a smart Black girl."

This aware, culturally confident, hip-hop dancer from the East Coast is also a nerd who loves to connect with people on an intellectual level. She sees herself going to law school perhaps on the East Coast and perhaps at an HBCU. Even though she is pleased with her experience and having chosen OSSU, she is curious about the HBCU experience and knows that the level of education she will receive there will further enrich her law school experience. Regarding her honors program experience, she observed,

It's nice to come in contact with other people who really care about their grades. And you can kind of nerd out a little bit cause like, everyone's like oh yea, we're going to go do this with my future and all this. So like these crazy big dreams aren't that crazy a lot of time when you're talking to other honors students, because they have them. So I think that's a good place.

As a college administrator, I often think that students are not able to fully utilize their critical thinking skills. Kali's experience in the honors program reminds me that teaching critical thinking is important; however, once students understand the point that is being made, we, as educators, can move on. Kali remarked, "Sometimes it [critical discussions] was fun, the other times you feel like, can we just simply answer this question?" The beauty in this statement is not only has Kali learned critical thinking, but also she is ready for the next phase of critical thinking in life, which may be law school for her. Perhaps without knowing it, her honors experience has contributed to opportunities that may be presented to her simply due to her willingness to automatically accept what is presented in front of her.

**Amani (Definition: Peaceful – Origin: West Africa)**

Amani is the second participant that I was unable to meet in person. Even though technology separated us, Amani's intellect and personality shone through the screen. She is the baby of the family and considers herself the family achiever. Her voice lowers as she describes that her sister lost her way for a few years but is now getting refocused on life as she continues to raise her daughter. Amani's mother is the sole breadwinner in the family and has given Amani the confidence to use her knowledge to always do better and to push herself beyond what she even thinks is possible for herself.

Her plans were to attend college out of state; however, OSSU became attractive because of the full-ride scholarships she was offered and its engineering program. Through taking a rigorous course load in high school, Amani was well prepared academically and socially for OSSU. Her excellent work ethic from high school continued into college, which allows her to work hard during the week, then she can unplug and relax with friends over the weekend, all while maintaining a 4.0 grade point average in honors mechanical engineering. She utilizes every bit of her knowledge and energy to ensure that she gets everything she is supposed to get out of her college education. She explained, "I applied to be in this program, and if I don't do what I need to do in order to stay in it, then it would just be like a wasted effort."

Several participants described their transition to OSSU as being difficult, especially as it relates to culture and interacting with students who did not look like them. Through middle school, Amani attended all-Black schools, and it was not until high school that she attended a predominately white school. I believe the diversity of schools



Amani attended greatly assisted with her being well-adjusted before entering OSSU. Her intelligence also validates who she is as she sits in her engineering classes. She provided this illustration:

I was going to say that the first thing people notice about me is that I'm Black.

But I don't think that they care about that, because engineering is just so hard.

And also in the engineering, the honors classes, the class is so hard that if there is someone who knows how to do something, you're going to sit there and want to talk to them. You won't alienate someone because they're like Black or anything like that.

Clearly, from this and other participants' lived experiences, the rigorous engineering curriculum assists in bypassing the issues of race in some college classrooms.

Amani believes she is noticed and remembered by professors because she sits in the front row of her classes. She also believes she is remembered because she works hard and proves her intelligence. When she entered OSSU, she may have had a slight doubt that she belonged in the honors engineering program; however, she looked around and realized everyone else shared her doubtful state. With that realization, she relaxed, put her shoulders back, and built her success through her work ethic. Honors has provided a secure space for her to be supportive and be supported by her colleagues. She thought the honors program was going to be competitive. She found the opposite. Through hard work and the expectation that students work with one another, competition (from her vantage point) has been diminished or eliminated. This has created an atmosphere of

collaboration that may carry these students and serve them well for the remainder of their lives, especially in their careers.

Amani faced hardships while growing up. She was homeless, and she has little to no contact with her father. Through the love and strength of her mother, she seeks to be successful so that she can give back to her mother. These experiences have also made her grateful for what she has, so she works to ensure other young Black girls know they can do it. She conveyed this hope as follows:

In the future, I hope that I'll be able to say I was an inspiration to girls who are pursuing an interest in um STEM, especially Black girls, because I know back in high school, I was the president of our Women in Science and Engineer Program and we had an outreach program where we'd go to the middle school by my high school and we'd talk to the girls. And there were like Black girls there that were like, oh engineering is too hard. And I was like, no, no, no, no. You can do this. And like I want them to be able to see like that if I can do it, they can do it as well. That's something that really, that I also keep in the back of my mind, especially right now when I'm going through college, because I want to be able to help them in the future.

**Ramla (Definition: Prophetess – Origin: East Africa)**

Ramla provided the balance that I sought with the participants of this study, because she was graduating and had a very rich experience at OSSU. In listening to her speak, she is the student that perhaps would have all of the aspects that one would expect of an honors student: has parents both of whom have master's degrees, was identified as

gifted and talented, earned a full-tuition scholarship to OSSU, was encouraged by her high school counselor to apply to Ivy League schools, and was also encouraged to apply for the honors program. As a graduating senior in biology and computer science, her experiences at OSSU were vivid, and because of them, she was comfortable with herself, with her intelligence, and now with graduation, making her way through life.

By not being a first-generation student, Ramla's academic path was guided by the knowledge of her parents and especially her maternal grandmother, who was also gifted and graduated from high school when she was 16. She credits her grandmother with being one of her largest influences, because she is retired and had the time to devote to nurturing and validating Ramla's educational journey. In many of the stories of the participants, there is a person that sits and listens, edits and guides, and for Ramla, this person is her grandmother. Her grandmother's guidance provided the confidence to move forward and be able to address tough situations.

Going into her college career allowed Ramla to be free from the beginning to accept the opportunities that OSSU and its honors program had to offer. She stayed in the honors residence hall and chose to become a sophomore advisor in the hall. As a sophomore advisor, she was the "mom" and her counterpart was the "dad" to advise six to seven first-year students as their "children." She saw this as an opportunity to not only give back but also be seen as an African American female who was involved and supportive of her community. After this experience, it was gratifying to her to be contacted by her "children" to receive guidance or college advice after they left the residence.

Ramla also saw this experience as being similar to what might happen in a professional setting. She was the only or one of a few African American women being confronted by annoying stereotypical racial incidents, and she learned how to navigate her way through them. Her way of navigation was to speak up. She gave this example:

We have to host an event . . . a formal dance . . . and so of course, when they play the rap dance songs, they were like “Ramla come dance for us,” and I was just like, no. You don’t ask me to dance when you’re doing the two-step to country . . . and when the Black song comes out, the Black girl got to be the opening act, and that was something I didn’t like.

These experiences continued to strengthen her resolve for pushing herself forward in her academics as well. As Ramla (literally) walks and pushes herself towards her academics, she is confronted by extreme views. She related this scenario:

Like any given day, you can see like those radical Christian people on the plaza. And then you also have like, I don’t know what they call it, neo-Nazi like, “Let’s Make America White Again.” And that happened yesterday, and there was like a whole thing on the plaza. So it’s like, it’s people here like to express their opinions I suppose. It’s not like, “Oh, we’re having a meeting and it’s in this particular room.” No, it’s on the plaza, and you’re going to have to walk by us and hear our opinions. It’s everyday life. I just go to class and focus on my education.

The feeling of freedom was apparent with Ramla by her not allowing issues to interrupt her learning. Her strength is illustrated as follows:

Our professor, he made us work in groups, and so I had to work in groups to like do all my homework. And so, we'd be there and anytime Ramla has an answer, she has to have all where she got the information from; she needs to open it up in the book, show the whole book where I got it from, and if anyone else just have the answer or gives their idea on how to solve the problem, it's taken as just fact. And that, it was so annoying. And it got to a point where I was just, I would do the homework on my own and then just come to the meetings and make sure that I got everything right. Like it was just, it's like, I don't understand why you're underestimating me like this much, like I'm in honors. When I do give something to the group, it is correct. Yet, I still have to prove myself every time.

For students who may not be comfortable in their intellectual realm, this and similar experiences may cause them to internalize the hurt and shut down academically. Students with the support and experience similar Ramla's overcome incidences like this and develop a resilience to the barriers they may encounter. She knew this was a time when she had to go and support herself and go it alone so as not to deal with the negativity of the group.

As a college administrator and reflecting on my own college experiences, I realize college is a transformative and magical time in one's life, and I believe the same is true for Ramla. Reflecting upon her honors program and OSSU experiences, she understands that she is one of a few, yet she was able to have a strong community and connections with other African American students at OSSU. In asking her to reflect on what it means to be an African American woman at a PWI in honors, Ramla said,

It just means that I'm someone who heard about the opportunity and took advantage of it. I don't think that means I'm a special Black girl; I think there are other Black girls who are just like me and who don't know enough about what's going on, and that could take advantage of it. I feel like there is so many more Black people that could be in honors. If it was marketed correctly, and if Black people were brought up more to like believe in themselves, don't think I'm special being a Black woman. I think I have value, but special, I don't know if that's what I will say.

The realization that she is not necessarily special has shown her that as she continues to grow in her world, she does not want the next generation to be as alone as she may have been. In this regard, she concluded,

I think just not, like not seeing other Black people in honors, it kind of molded me in a way that like when I get to where I'm trying to get to is like I need to bring more people with me, because it's like I don't like being the only one because I don't think I'm the only one qualified to be here.

### **Summary**

The experience of the Infinite Eight in OSSU's honors program and at OSSU in general mirrors what the literature says about African American women in college. These eight participants are highly motivated individuals, have strong support through a myriad of networks, and navigated the barriers of higher education to keep them on their higher education path (Allen et al., 1991; Hill Collins, 2000). With these elements, they have had the opportunity to explore and understand what they are capable of, and their

capabilities are infinite. In Chapters 5 and 6, I will continue to explore what African American women need to succeed as they pursue higher education and as they consider how they choose to be involved on campus as they earn their undergraduate degree.

No educational journey is the same, which can be seen from the narratives of the eight participants. What is the same is the phenomenon of attending OSSU and participating in the honors program. The significance of this phenomenon is that their lived experiences in relation to higher education and honors programs will further expand the understanding and application of BFT. This critical linkage is directly tied to building upon the intellectual activism in which African American women have participated but for which they have not always received credit (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; hooks, 1984; Hill Collins, 2000). Additionally, BFT contributes to dismantling the matrix of domination that continues to be prevalent in American higher education. This continues to be true for African American women, whose contributions have been diminished and even dismissed. However, with the assistance of BFT, a theory designed for and by African American women, the following chapters will further outline the significant contributions of these African American collegiate honors program participants.

## CHAPTER FIVE. SING A BLACK GIRL'S SONG

In Chapter 4 I shared a brief synopsis of the lived experiences of the Infinite Eight, the participants in this dissertation. I provided a small window into who they are as individuals, scholars and African American women navigating their higher education landscape at OSSU (Olde Southern State University). In Chapter 5 I build on the narratives by expanding on how the collected data answered the following research questions:

- What are the academic paths experienced by African American women that have prepared them for entrance and success within a collegiate honors program?
- What are the lived experiences of African American women who currently are or who have recently been enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program?

Chapters 5 and 6 complement each other by weaving together findings and discussing what the research means (Chapter 5) and then discussing implications for further research, theory, and practice (Chapter 6). The research questions sought to guide the reader through the path of successful African American women as they entered and navigated their way through OSSU's honors program. The questions were specifically constructed to understand what it may take for African American women to successfully navigate to and through college and then succeed in an honors program. Through the lens of Black feminist thought (BFT) and its tenets, a new understanding of high-attaining



African American collegiate women is being made available to show that many high-attaining individuals are assisting in narrowing achievement inequities. The significance is not that these inequities are being narrowed (although that is highly significant), it is important to note that this journey is told by and for African American women. Sharing the stories and the insight of the infinite eight may assist higher education professionals with understanding more of how a student's life experience contributes to their educational success.

Utilizing the tenets of BFT and linking them to the themes represents the focus of this chapter. By focusing on the tenets to further describe the participants lived experiences, I seek to expand the understanding of BFT through the lens of African American female college students who are participating in an honors program. The tenets and themes are as follows: Tenet 1: Empowerment – Theme: Freedom; Tenet 2: Tension - Theme: Viewing Campus Life; Tenet 3: Connections – Theme: Self Definition; Tenet 4: Intellectualism/Social Justice – Theme I Belong Here; Tenet 5: Change – Theme: [Dynamic] Black Girl Magic. This chapter is named Sing a Black Girl Song, a poem written by Ntozake Shange (Shange, 1977). This poem by Shange encourages the reader to remind the Black woman is powerful as it reminds these individuals and the readers to acknowledge all of the accomplishments of Black women whether they recognize them for themselves or not. The full poem is in Appendix J. To pay homage to Shange's poem, at the beginning of each discussion of the Tenet and Theme, I have selected a song sung by an African American female artist to provide a creative entry into the sections. Music

often provides a soundtrack for the generations, and I thought it appropriate to incorporate songs and artists that embodied the tenets and the themes.

## **Tenet 1 – Empowerment**

### **Theme 1 - Freedom**

*I'm taking my freedom, pulling it off the shelf  
Putting it on my chain, wearing it around my neck  
I'm taking my freedom, putting it in my car  
Wherever I choose to go it will take me far (Scott & Bell, 2004).*

### **Freedom**

Collins (2000), Defines empowerment as: "...aiming to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions" (p. 22). One must be empowered to resist oppression, both its practices and the ideas that justify it (Hill Collins, 2000). To recognize how these participants are empowered, understanding the definition of empowerment is also critical: "the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights" (Empowerment, n.d.). Understanding how to empower those who have been systematically and historically unempowered within the context of American higher education is difficult. Even though there is research outlining how American higher education has marginalized racial and ethnic minorities, there is a tendency to minimize the impact of the marginalization (Harper, 2012).

Fayola, Abeni and Eshe, shared their experience of not being offered a flyer in the student union. This event may seem innocuous, however, it was impactful enough for them to mention during their interviews. One may think, "so what" to students of color

not receiving a flyer, as it is simply a flyer. Eshe's take on not being offered flyers is interesting:

I've had experiences where I feel like I'm being discriminated against because when you walk through the student union or walk through campus they're usually handing out flyers and stuff like that and sometimes they [other Black students] don't get flyers and they feel like it might be because they're Black because the people behind them would get flyers but they didn't get a flyer. People sometimes like to attribute that to maybe you look unfriendly. So they're like why should I give you a flyer if you look unfriendly and uninterested but I mean that's happened to me a couple of times but that's because I didn't look interested and I didn't want a flyer so I was like mean-mugging [showing a stern face] people like just don't talk to me. (Eshe)

Eshe provides a critical view into the window of how African American college women (specifically millennial) may interpret racist micro-aggressions on American college campuses. While she acknowledges the incidents that occur, she is empowered to flip the narrative. Her narrative is flipped because of her not taking being offered a flyer personally. By not taking it personally, Eshe actualizes her power in that she did not want a flyer, did not care if she was offered a flyer and therefore, chose to not engage.

Without the distraction of engaging in combating racial micro-aggressions, these African American female honors program participants are able to focus on other things. (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Calling combating racial micro-aggressions a distraction may be an oversimplification; however, it may also be a defense mechanism for these

individuals as they navigate their college path. These defense mechanisms may shield them from some of the hurtful interactions they may encounter. Further, Eshe said,

One day on Twitter people were posting their experiences going here (OSSU) as students of color and it just really opened my eyes because for me when I came here I went straight into a FLO (Freshman Leadership Organization) and there I was, I was the only Black girl.

Regardless of the outward defenses of being one of a few may appear strong, the internal process may reveal a type of loneliness that only Black women may experience by being the only. Mandisa says, “it’s always nice to have someone that looks like you that you can relate to in your classes”. The actions of the participants to not engage in every racist micro-aggression they encounter, does not diminish the work of other college students who are engaging in the continued struggle for equity in American higher education, for example the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. What may be important to note is that the participants balance how they internalize and then act upon situations they may encounter (Larkin & Clifton, 2006).

I faced this [racial micro-aggressions] when I was growing up as well, so it does not affect me as much as I think it would affect other people. I just take it as-- and not in any rude sense but I think its ignorance and a lesson that should be taught but I don't take it upon myself to teach that lesson but I don't think too much of it and I go on with my day. (Mandisa)

If every racial micro-aggression was confronted by those that experience them, not much would be accomplished in this country. The ability for individuals like Mandisa to come

to a place of confidence to recognize that it is not [solely] up to her to teach in these instances is poignant. Her focus on herself and her survival allowed her to navigate an environment of what some may describe as hostile. Experiencing and confronting ignorance is exhausting and this African American woman has come to understand that her role is to recognize what is occurring around her, name it and continue to move forward.

Another aspect of freedom for the participants is their freedom to take advantage of the opportunities that are presented to them because they are honors students. About internship opportunities, Amara said,

I did an internship at Coca Cola after my sophomore year and then I did an internship for Mars chocolate after my junior year. That's kind of where I was heading. And then, I think my senior year I think I decided that I wanted to shift gears and got interested in internship of education particularly knowing what my history was and kind of what I had walked through and just wanting more Black girls to be in engineering classes. (Amara)

Through the opportunities she was afforded, Amara saw that she again was one of a few and was seeking ways to open up opportunities for others. Her educational path allowed her to focus on more than solely herself. By experiencing her internship, she sought ways to bring more Black girls with her into engineering which is another way to increase the number of African American women in engineering and honors.

## **Hard Work**

It is a difficult task to define and then understand the nuances of what hard work means and how it shows up in relation to empowerment. However, for the eight participants, one may be able to surmise what hard work means to these individuals and in turn understand how this empowers them. One definition of hard work states, “Working intelligently and vigorously at a given task to complete it with maximum efficiency” (Connors, 2017, p.1). Several of the participants (Kali, Fayola, and Ramla) described how they came to understand hard work from being placed in gifted and talented programs. Regarding her academic preparation prior to attending OSSU Ramala says,

...pushing myself taking AP classes. Just like knowing that even though the class is harder, it’s gonna like help prepare me for the future. So I came in with that mindset when I entered the honors program. Like I’m going to take these honors classes and it’s going to help me prepare for a professional school. (Ramla)

This is not to say that the other participants Amara, Eshe, Amani, Abeni and Mandisa did not receive the same guidance as they may have received the information differently, or they did not specify this during their interviews. For example, Abeni’s parents ensured she received the support she needed from home because she was homeschooled. Her father has a doctorate in ministry and because he stopped out of college to begin his family, he instilled in his children to earn their degrees early. “Don’t do it the hard way like I did, working full time with a family.” Understanding that regardless of their background, these participants were empowered to either seek out the honors program or they were encouraged to apply by those who influenced them. Amani directly linked her identity to hard work.

Again, I would say um just the hard work [what is salient to her] because being an honors student, I do have to take like one or two extra classes than everyone and um the degree program for engineering is already um pretty intense. So, I just really have to put in some hard work to complete these things and continue to do like the best. Um hard work, dedication definitely. Because it does get trying, there are some trying times in the classes, just like you might not want to get up but no, you like I applied to be in this program and if I don't do what I need to do in order to stay in it then it would just be like a wasted effort. Basically doing something for nothing.

(Amani)

Amara's journey of finding her empowerment may remind us of what it felt like to not fit in growing up and to desperately wish to fit in with our peers. Being a first-generation American further compounded her educational experience and could have significantly impeded her academic path. The significance of Amara being an immigrant, a first-generation American and a first-generation college student cannot be underestimated. In considering systems within the United States such as education, they are not constructed to support individuals like Amara.

So I wanted to go to an [Ivy League institution] but I couldn't because I was not eligible federally [for financial aid]. So then that became really complicated and I thought that I was never be able to go to college at all. But OSSU did have [a financial support program] and I applied for that and that did get me some in state aid and like that, like knowing that I could go to college and go to OSSU like changed everything for me and I could not have been more grateful that I was

going to be able to go to college the following year. And that's kind of how I got to OSSU and it worked out so great. I love it there. (Amara).

It is significant for one to succeed through one of the above factors, however, Amara pulled upon every one of her resources, herself, her family, her teachers, financial support from OSSU and the honors program to guide her.

Like I think even my parents were like a little bit frustrated with me as a kid because I was like I have to do school, I have to do school. I was like this is a part of me, I was always super independent always like just had to be the best. And you know, I think like God has just gifted me to be like academically successful. So I guess that was another thing because I was good at it. Like I kept going, like that was my thing. (Amara)

Amara's empowerment came from not allowing anything to stop her from achieving her academic goals. Additionally, her empowerment is also boosted from the power of reflection and that she continues to benefit from her past experiences and brings them into to the present. Of her honors program experience she says,

I think like just knowing like the path I walk, and you know with not being documented for a long time, and just being able to know that I was able to still achieve this I think like really means a lot to me and everything means a lot to like the person that I am. And like, and I think also it's such a reminder because I know that I work hard but I also know that like my level of working hard is not all that got me here. (Amara)



Regardless of how many definitions there may be, the concept or theory of working hard to achieve goals is ever-present throughout all levels of education (Horvat & O'Connor, 2006). Relating hard work to African American women and African American women in collegiate honors programs may seem to be an easy prospect. These individuals have goals, both academic and in life, and are achieving them. However, one must consider the mechanics of how the participants realize and then actualize their hard work. Fayola indicates that her scholarship program prepared her for college. Regarding her acceptance into the scholarship program, "It was definitely quite the experience going through three rounds of interviews just making myself stand out through hundreds of people to be included as one of ten I think that is pretty special." For eight months, the program prepared her for college, "I was extra prepared for college that way [from participating in the scholarship program]."

One of the first goals we understand from the participants is that they are seeking to achieve a college degree since they are enrolled at a university and are in the honors program. The honors program has assisted them in continuing to build upon their educational goals and to get the most out of their college experience.

I don't want to go somewhere where I'm not challenged academically. So me saying it's not easy is not like me wanting to say nobody go here because it's a great university but it's not easy in the way that our classes and the way our material's structured is not... oh simply read the textbook and what did it say on like, it's not going to say what did it say on page 67. But like knowing the information from page 67 you need to build upon that and understand the material

conceptually and be able to apply it. So that's why it's not easy because our professors can really tell when they give us our tests or in class. Who's really reading the book, who's really taking the time to understand the material and take it a step further than just what comes straight from the textbook. (Eshe)

Another way to phrase Eshe's statement is that she does not wish to take the easiest path to achieve her education.

So I think the moral of my high school path was just kind of being one step ahead. I took Spanish three as well because, classes I didn't have to take, I just wanted to be one step ahead so that when I got to college, it would just be like a review, so I can do well. (Fayola)

Likewise, Amani shared:

I kept my grades up [in high school] and I was really involved. Um, I took really challenging courses in high school. I took AP Chem, AP physics, I even took organic chemistry. And I just really wanted to set myself apart from other people at my school because yeah we all took AP classes, but there were a lot of courses that people didn't take. So I wanted to take those challenging courses because I knew for what I wanted to do at OSSU, I would need to have a background in those so I could be successful. (Amani)

By not taking the easy road, these participants have developed layers of success for themselves. The layers include (but are not limited to): taking more classes than are required, participating in an honors program, remaining in good standing in the honors program by maintaining a GPA of 3.5 or higher, continuing to practice their faith and

remaining close with their families. About continuing to practice her faith, Fayola says, “I am a Catholic, Roman Catholic. Been in the Catholic faith all my life. I was born into it. I did all the sacraments a baptism, confirmation, first communion, all those things. I still go to church even here at OSSU.” There is not a singular “something” that indicates success. Success is layered and it is those layers that has sustained these African American female participants through their undergraduate and honors program experience (Horvat & O’Connor, 2006). The layers of success include (but are not limited to) familial support, understanding the path to college, developing time management skills and the understanding that taking risk will be beneficial in their lives. The participants continue to benefit from their success by drawing upon those elements when needed. As the participants have continued to grow through their education, they may not realize they are using their layers of success, it may simply happen for them. For example, Amani’s definition of success is, “the ability to learn the material the best of your ability and actually understand it.”

### **Social Context**

The infinite eight have created a social context - a space for themselves that supports their feelings of being empowered. “Social context matters in how people use identity to create space for personal freedom.” (Hill Collins, 2016, p. 125). The overarching social context of the participants is a large, rural PWI with a student population that is approximately 40% students of color and of that 40%, fewer than 4% are Black. Creating a space for themselves in an environment where they not only feel safe, but they are empowered to be themselves is critical to supporting their growth. Fayola is one of the

participants that discussed White students choosing to stand in a cafeteria rather than sitting with her, “People would rather like go stand in the corner than sit next to me but I mean I don't know, maybe I'm looking at it the wrong way, maybe that is not the case but it does happen quite often” (Fayola). This is another example of being comfortable with self and not internalizing an act by one person. Fayola does not define her self-worth through how others may perceive her. However, the feelings of isolation that are brought on by racism may linger in her thoughts for the rest of her life. As Fayola encounters racial micro-aggressions, she pulls on her past to support her present.

I just loved growing up there [her hometown] because I was really like exposed to the world and how to talk to different people. So my friends, I found my place and like you know people like me, the high achievers, and we like all encouraged each other to do well. It was a big school but it was also pretty small. So we were all together for a good four years, just encouraging each other and being successful together. (Fayola)

The honors program is another way for her to continue pushing herself academically and it also provides an opportunity for space where conversation between her and her colleagues can occur. For example, as Fayola was considering when she would seek a master's degree, one of her professors shared his insight with her:

He [professor] was telling me how like in petroleum engineering they'd rather you dedicate a year to field experience than just getting a master's here because he said that what they teach you here doesn't really compare to what you learn in actual field life. I definitely see that like being very valid. So I don't know. I can definitely

see them telling me that a master's is not necessary but I don't know, I just want more out of life and it would just be great to have a masters hanging on the wall. (Fayola)

Another element of social context is being able to set aside the belief that within the academic setting everything is about race and skin color. About the focus on academics versus the color of her skin, Amani had this to say about the rigor of engineering,

I was going to say that the first thing people notice about me is that I'm Black. But I don't think that they care about that, because in engineering it's just so hard. And also in the engineering, the honors classes, the class is so hard if there is someone who knows how to do something, you're going to sit there and to talk to them. You won't alienate them because they're like Black or anything like that. (Amani)

The social context for Amani moves beyond simply feeling safe as a student within the OSSU campus, it means creating a space where she can be safe, and recognized for her intelligence.

Well, so, I think something's that's really important to me, um to know about me, is back in high school, I was homeless. And um for me, being that it really showed me what it meant to like to persevere and to really like never give up. And when you have like goals, you need to latch onto it and never let it out of your sight. Because that was one of the things that kept me going in high school. It actually made me stronger. And then, the day I could keep my grades up and not really let that affect me shows how strong of a person I am and that's translated here at OSSU, especially with my grades and my involvement on

campus and really pretty much everything that I do. That definitely too um just really appreciate what life has given me. (Amani)

One may come to understand that Amani's perspective and resilience is rooted in her experiences as she grew up. Perhaps being homeless provided her with the understanding that even if she was confronted with racism during college, not much could be worse than being homeless.

### **Opportunities and Freedom**

Change is difficult, especially within American higher education (Allen et al., 1991). While OSSU is a large PWI, the institution and more specifically its honors program has created an atmosphere where the participants are more than simply seen. Yes, they are seen because of the color of their skin, but they are also being seen for their abilities. For several of the participants (Abeni, Amani and Fayola), the opportunities began before they entered OSSU because they were supported through a scholarship and mentoring program. These types of programs have assisted OSSU with not only diversifying their student body but guiding students to an environment where they can succeed. They have also provided deserving students the opportunity to not only attend OSSU, but to earn a college degree with little to no debit. One of the scholarship programs recognizes the impact that building community has on retention by grouping students together who will be attending the same university. This has enabled them to develop a supportive learning community before they begin their freshman year.

It's [scholarship program] like something that they have in high school and it's a very highly competitive very rigorous program to get into. I usually think it's at

more impoverished high schools. And then they just send you to whichever college they feel is best for you. And in some cases they might even push you to a certain college or like no we're sending you to this one. Once you get to um go to your college you go to you already have a group of friends that you know from high school who are there with you at college. And so then it's kinda like a community, some sort of group of friends when you first get there and you work together. And you know study groups and student meetings and whatnot. (Abeni)

This is another factor in the participants in not only taking advantage of opportunities but utilizing what they have to assist in their success during their time at OSSU. The scholarship programs are not the only method that the African American female participants connected to their peers. Social media also plays an important role in connecting students before they arrive on campus.

...it is still a majority white school, but I think that totally brought our class together, because we kind of it all started this Twitter group. Like you're Black and you're going to OSSU. We got in this huge group message and we actually got to know each other before we came to OSSU and we're like obviously, we're not, everyone's like friend friend. But when you see each other walking you say hi and you stop, and ask how are you doing? (Kali)

The pre-OSSU opportunities for the participants are designed specifically for them. These programs are designed to support students who may be low-income, first-generation students to assist them to enter college, be retained and earn a degree. The influence of the programs assists the participants with being able to have the confidence

to navigate opportunities that may be difficult for the participants to experience. For example, Ramla was a tutor (who also participated in a scholarship program) and had to prove that she was qualified to be in that position.

Even as a senior. It's like the job I have right now, I'm an Academic Peer Mentor cause you know, giving back is important and mentorship is important. So, like if I come in there and it's a room full of White freshmen, there're like "How are you going to help us?" and then they'll ask me something to try to like validate if I know what I'm talking about. And I'm just like they're not going to hire me if I'm not qualified. Like I'm a professional. I look professional. I'm giving you good information but if I don't tell you "Oh, I'm in honors", then they won't take me seriously, at first. So, that's so annoying. (Ramla)

As annoying as it was for Ramla for her credentials to be questioned, her presence as an Academic Peer Mentor made a strong statement. She took the opportunity to support her fellow students in a critical role by giving back to her institution. The fact that Ramla, an African American woman was an Academic Peer Mentor, assisted them with their assignments and advocated for herself is an example of how she took the opportunity, even though that is not her responsibility, to educate her colleagues. These are the types of occurrences that change perspectives and begin to shift cultures which are important in higher education (Coleman, Kotinek & Oda, 2017). Shifting culture is a subtle happening that creates change that may not be seen immediately, however, change does happen.

Yeah sometimes, you have to debate, like this one guy. We had a Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest by the Student Center and I overheard this one guy in my



group that I had to work with and he was like “oh yeah, I totally wanted to like protest the protest”. So I kind of just like went through this thought process in my head. Because he wasn't talking to me but like this girl was there and he was like two seats over. So I was like Kali, what are you about to do? Are you about to take ten and hear him out or just be like “so...”, and I went with the latter. And I was like, “what about the protest?” And he was like, “oh just the BLM, I don't agree with it.” And I was like “oh why?” as I wanted to hear his view. And of course, some people, as soon as you start trying to talk to them [as he was], they're like “whoa don't get offended”. And I was like “no, really I just like want to hear what you have to say”. So we just like talked about it, and obviously he said, “I don't think police brutality is a problem”. And I was trying to control my face this whole time. And I was just talking to him, like well, “I do think it's a problem” and he was like “I don't really want to ... that's just my view, I don't really want to”. And I knew I was making the girl in the middle of us feel uncomfortable. But I was like if you're uncomfortable about it, like obviously there's a problem. I'm not scared of voicing my views. So as to like that aspect, because especially with today's society like if you're with everyone being so loud about their views, obviously sometimes you just want to be able to sit somewhere and not have a whole debate about every single thing. But honestly, I'm kind of proud of myself also that hey, if you're outnumbered, like don't be scared of saying what you have to say, so, also that's a part of me.

If Ramla's and Kali's experiences with her White colleagues shifts their knowledge of African American women and their abilities, albeit small, this leads to progress. This is the ongoing environment that African American women must withstand to change a culture that has minimized their accomplishments (Hill Collins, 2000).

## **Tenet 2 – Tension**

### **Theme 2 – Viewing Campus Life**

*Some people talk about ya like they know all about ya  
When you get down they doubt ya  
And when you tip it on the scene, yeah they talkin' bout it  
Cause they can't tip on the scene  
They just talk about it, t-t-t-talk bout it  
When you get elevated  
They love it or they hate it  
You dance up on them haters  
Keep getting funky on the scene  
While they jumpin' round ya  
They trying to take all of your dreams  
But you can't allow it  
Cause baby whether you're high or low  
Whether you're high or low  
You gotta tip on the tightrope (tip, tip on it)  
T-t-t-tip on the tightrope (tip, tip on it)  
Baby, baby, baby, whether you're high or low (high or low)  
Baby whether you're high or low (high or low)  
You got to tip on the tightrope (tip, tip on it)  
Now let me see you do the tightrope (tip, tip on it)  
And I'm still tippin' on it (Monáe, 2010)*

### **Tension**

The definition of this tenet states: “Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this [does not mean] that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences” (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 25). This is a poignant tenet for these eight participants as they attend (or did attend) OSSU and participated in its honors

program. Having the ability to utilize BFT to show that these participants have common challenges and experiences and they are not mirror images of one another is key. Several of the participants mention that they do not often see faces like themselves on campus which is not surprising since they attend a large PWI. This isolation may trigger a response that may only come from an African American woman that is confident with being one of a few on campus and not only accepts the fact that she is one of the few, she works to embrace that fact. Eshe, for example, indicated that she makes it a point to stand out on campus and ensures she is not invisible. One of the ways she does this is by going out of her way to greet visiting students on campus so that they know she and others like her are attending OSSU.

...it's really important to me because whenever high schools come to tour or people come to tour on their own and they see me or other African-Americans or other minorities walking around campus they're like I have a place here and I can belong here. (Eshe)

This continues the feeling of community that the participants have developed. Like Eshe, other participants have not only internalized their experiences, they have put action to what others may consider their pain. Some of the participant's dialogue may sound as if they are not satisfied with being the only. They may see their status with possibilities and not obstacles.

I think just not like not seeing other Black people in honors, it kind of molded me in a way that like when I get to where I'm trying to get, I need to bring more

people with me because it's like I don't like being the only one because I don't think I'm the only one qualified to be here. (Ramla)

While they are the only or one of a few, the pressure of being in that position could cause the participants to isolate themselves and choose not to participate or stand out within their campus culture. This is another example of the tension that Hill Collins (2000) speaks about in BFT, "...despite the common challenges confronting U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint" (p. 25). When Amara entered college she wished to belong and not be so different from her peers. "I think I just wanted to blend so much you know I don't want anyone to know that I'm undocumented. I didn't even talk about being Nigerian. I just wanted to be as close to what they were".

African American women are usually not reared to leave well enough alone as they are reared by Black women who have greatly assisted in shaping their paths (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). Another part of that tension relating to the women in their lives is not only remembering the guidance that these influencers have provided to them while they are in college, but continually keeping them in mind. Several of the participants spoke about how impactful their mothers, grandmothers and family have been on their lives:

My mom, she's just a really strong person. And she's always from day one been pushing me to stay in school and to like do well and be the best that I can possibly be. And so that's one of the things that's been pushing me here at OSSU to like stay number one, keep working on my studies so I can sit there and like, in the

future just like pay back to her for everything that she's done for me. Because it's like so much that she's done. (Amani)

My grandma is really the one who is really focused on my academic success and progress. She's retired so she has more time to dedicate to me and my studies. She herself graduated high school at the age of 16. So, she has experience of being academically successful and she wanted to pass that on to her children and her grandchildren. (Ramla)

...as far as ethnicity goes and nationality goes it's really important to me especially like the background I came from with my grandpa and how my mom and my uncle and aunt worked hard to get to America and worked hard to stay in America because it's hard as an immigrant. (Eshe)

Many of the participants spoke about how they have continued to practice their religion while at OSSU. This is a strong reminder of the ongoing impact that parents and family have on the participants. For one participant, Ramla, her faith allows her to have an identity that does not stand out like the color of her skin and allows her to move confidently through campus in a way where she feels a different type of belonging.

Being a Black woman is important to me. It's like a part of my identity that I think is important. I mean it is important but I think that's the most apparent thing that's apparent. Like I know like religion is a part of my identity that I care about a lot but being in OSSU, it's like really Christian dominated so it's not the difference about me that's apparent. Having my cultural identity and things like that, it's like "Oh, man, you're different. Like it's right in your face." So, it's important to me to

be able to retain that and not necessarily like assimilate to the culture that is ANM. (Ramla)

The intersection of identity and being an African American woman brings about tension (Hill Collins, 2000). A part of Ramla's tension is that she knows that she stands out on campus because of the color of her skin. However, she does have the ability to not be so easily identified through being Christian. This is her way of pushing back against the dominant culture of only one of her identities being recognized.

There is an ongoing tension of always being visible and being invisible. Several of the participants mentioned that their professors remember them, perhaps for obvious reasons. Yes, this may be because they are one of a few or the only African American student in class. However, one of the participants, Amani, believed that she is remembered for her hard work and her professors took a genuine interest in her.

I guess my professors they remember me more because I am one of the few people if not the only one [African American] in my class, and in my classes, that has like a different skin tone. So like if I show that I know how to do stuff and I put my best foot forward it shows them that I can actually do this thing, they remember me more than if I was like a white female or a white male. Because they're like oh this person is different, so let me remember them. (Amani)

Ramla also spoke about receiving a recommendation from one of her professors,

My professor, he's fine and just got a letter of recommendation from him. So, you know, that's a good thing because it's in a smaller class and I think I'm one of the few Black students he's had in the last few years. When I went to like go talk to

him, he's like "Yeah, definitely, I remember you." And it's like, let's be honest, I wasn't like the person who answers questions in class. So, why is it that you remember me? Cause I made good grades? Everyone probably made good grades like it's cause I'm Black, that's why you remember me. But I'm not upset, he wrote me a good letter. (Ramla)

There are positive and negative of being the only. Ramla is a good student and she stands out in class for her intellect as well as the color of her skin. Instead of lamenting of being the only, Fayola takes pride in her position, "But it feels good to be like the only one. It does feel good to be the only one. It makes me feel like I'm there representing everyone so people that yeah, it's a possibility." There is a tension from not wishing to stand out solely for one's color but also standing out because of ability and the color of one's skin.

Harrison-Cook (1999), found that one of the reasons students chose not to participate in honors programs was because they feared that their grade point average (GPA) would decline. Participants in this study indicated that because of the honors program, maintaining a high GPA was a must for them, Eshe said, "It's [being a part of the honors program] changed my undergraduate goals by forcing me to get that 3.5 GPA. It's really made me think about what I really wanted to do in the future after undergrad." In addition to the GPA requirement, there are other milestones that participants need to meet in order to remain active in the program. One of those milestones is the Capstone Project (CP). The CP provides an opportunity for the participants to focus on one of five disciplines (research, teaching, service, leadership and performance) which brings together their undergraduate experience at OSSU. Several of the participants spoke about

giving back to the community immediately surrounding OSSU. As with other college towns, the community that surrounds the campus may not benefit from the campus and it would like, or as one may think. For Abeni's CP she has chosen to teach financial literacy in the county that surrounds OSSU. She researched and found that the county has a significant number of individuals in poverty and she seeks to directly impact poverty in the OSSU community.

There's um definitely a very like in poverty section of the county. So I feel more compelled to reach out to them and teach them about financial literacy than students here because OSSU already has so many resources for students they just have to like use them. Whereas in the county unless you're at OSSU you're not getting that so especially teaching people how to save how to make a budget. Yeah kind of doing that and my different ways like to help them out with their taxes especially because there's some deductions that not everyone knows about. I feel more compelled to work in the county area. So, but like it is pushes me to get out of comfort zone. (Abeni)

While many of the participants indicated they sought to maintain their GPA at or above a 3.5 (the minimum to remain in the OSSU honors program), they knew that they deserved to be in the program.

I definitely do feel like different here, of course. There aren't many African American women there [in engineering]. I can count them on my hands maybe. I walk into a room you know I'm like the only Black woman there but I don't let it get to me so I kind of look past that and kind of see myself like I don't feel



disadvantaged to any of the other students because I know that I'm smart and I deserve to be here as much as they do. (Fayola)

I guess at some of the meetings, being like one of the few people in the honors program, especially engineering honors program um and being Black. It's just, sometimes a little bit unnerving because sometimes you might feel like you don't belong because there's just so many white people around you. But when you think about it, you're like 'oh yeah', I really do belong because I worked my butt off just as hard as these people did to get here and be where I am right now. So I may have felt uncomfortable in the beginning when I had my first huge engineering honors meeting, but after that, I was like oh these people feel my struggle as well. We're all trying to like do our best. (Amani)

By the participants realizing this fact that they, one they belonged in the program, and two that there was more to college than chasing their GPA opened them up to the other possibilities. For example, Kali found her freedom by challenging herself to enter the honors program as she sought to enter law school after graduating from OSSU,

Since I know like in my future, I'm going to go to law school. I was like, well, I need to try and challenge myself now before I get there. So, I was like oh crap. Also, it [being in honors] came with like a little stigma [from engineering students] of like "oh, you're a liberal arts major", I'm an engineer". Like my major is so much harder than yours [she believes is what the other students are thinking]. I've encountered that already and I'm like girl, if you ever (laughter). I mean, I hate to admit it, but that was like a very small percent of it. Like if I'm a

liberal arts major, I might as well do honors also if it's not going to be that hard, then I should do something, it's fine. But so far, I you know, the honors classes are. We have to do extra work, but I like it so far. (Kali)

Another participant, Amani, built a race car with a team of other women,

I'm building a racecar. I'm on a team with about 15 girls. Um, my part, I'm on the frame and steering team and so, we've been working on setting the frame up so when it comes time to race the car in June, it will be sturdy and nothing will fall apart. Um, the steering. We've had to change up our steering a little bit because we've run into some issues um with the wheels. Being able to turn the wheels, so that we had to change up the steering. But other than that it's going pretty well.

We're on track to finish up before the deadline. (Amani)

To these participants, their empowerment has enabled them to be comfortable with navigating awkward social encounters, to being confident in being the only or one of a few African American students in a class. Regardless of why or how these students became their confident selves, being in honors has further enhanced their sense of belonging at OSSU.

### **Being Serious**

One portion of Alice Walker's definition of womanism states, "Responsible. In charge. *Serious*" (Walker, 1983, p. xii). These responsible, in charge and serious eight women are the embodiment of womanism as they navigate their educational space at OSSU. It has been documented that students of color must work harder than their White colleagues to receive equitable recognition for the same work (Allen et al., 1991). These

participants feel the pressure to achieve not only as an honors program student, but as an African American female student at a PWI:

It [being an African American woman at a PWI] definitely means that I am one of the few. It's really interesting to walk into your classes on like the first day of school and look around and be like, there is no one else like me. A lot of the time, I'll be the only African American person period in my Engineering classes. Engineering Honors classes have like 40 people at the max. While other classes, they have like 60-70 people so already in my classes, the number of people is small and then like just being an honors student makes it so that it's even smaller. So I just really put my best effort and like really try my best to shine because already like being Black and female in Engineering, my professors are like already taking interest in me cause they're like 'Oh, this is different, different'. So I just really want to put my best effort so I can be like, 'Oh yeah, I'm actually smart, I belong here'. I'm doing what it needs to do just like the rest of the people in this room.' I guess it kinda puts a little bit more pressure on me because I feel as though they have like a mindset like, 'Oh you don't belong here.' So I just wanna work equally as hard to prove that I actually do. (Amani)

The participants also realize that they have the power to change their environment by opening up and encouraging others to become part of the program:

I don't know how to describe it like my experience hasn't been bad. So I'm like I guess part of me is kind of like I want to kind of maybe even like pave the way to reach out to other African-American women. To be like "look, I'm in this program

and you don't have to worry about [not having] other people who will not look like you in the program" or I want to recruit more people so that's kind of my mindset. (Kali)

One of the questions posed to the participants was, "What roles do you believe you play in regard to your family, friends, education and within the honors program?" This question's significance also ties back to womanism as, "...the center of womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment" (Izgarjan & Markov, 2012, p. 305). As discussed, the roles of African American women are intersected between race, gender, family, religion, friends and more (Settles, 2006). The significance of the eight participants and the role that they see themselves play continues to highlight the atmosphere of support the participants create for themselves (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

I'm extremely multifaceted. Also play kind of a mother role I guess. Well I don't like the term mother. I like to say that auntie because for like the Black Greeks. We in order to join any of the Black organizations you had to attend 80 percent of the study hours on Sundays. That's for everyone it's not just any particular one just like everyone has to go. So some of my friends I walk up to them and I'm like, "hey how's your studying going? Is that Netflix related to your studying?" Like a couple of friends even I even like check on them every now and like hey how's your homework going? You go all caught up, you ahead? Have you eaten today when was the last time you went to sleep? So. Like my closer friends. Call me like 'yes mother?' (Abeni)

It may appear that Abeni only checks in on her colleagues, however, we can also look at it as her keeping herself accountable as well. If she was not studying, she could not ask anyone else if they are studying either. Abeni's worked to develop connections with people to show that she cares about them and about herself. Kali has also created a similar supportive atmosphere with her friends,

I feel like, I mean I would like to believe that a lot of people can come talk to me about anything. Like one of my good friends that I made here, he recently, he came to me and was like I'm kind of suffering from depression and all that other stuff. Which is obviously, especially with guys, people don't really open up about that a lot. So at first I was even honored that he would be like, "yo, I need to talk to you about this". So I'd like to say I'm a good listener. (Kali)

Being one of the few is an impactful experience for these participants. Regardless if it is true whether they are being singled out or not, their perception is that they stand out. Their words and their actions show how being a woman impacts their surroundings. Mandisa said something similar, "I think support's the best thing [about her role] because not everybody can be a friend but not everybody can be there when you need them, and that's something I try really hard to do." The tension that these women feel from being the only, to being questioned about their intellect and abilities shapes their sphere of womanism. They have created a culture where they care for others while also taking care of themselves. Adding the component of the honors program with their intersecting identities, these participant's confidence enables them to create a world where they thrive and validate themselves (Hill Collins, 1989).

### **Tenet 3 – Connections**

#### **Theme 3 – Self Definition**

*Who is this I've tried so long fight?  
Filling my heads with lies that I'm not good enough  
Then I heard something in my ear  
Tell I'm perfect, now that I know the truth  
Time to show and prove  
Every part of me is a vision of a portrait  
Of Mona, of Mona Lisa  
Every part of me is beautiful  
And I finally see I'm a work of art  
A masterpiece. (Sullivan & Bell, 2015)*

#### **Similarities**

About Black women's experience, Hill Collins (2000) pushes the reader to understand that yes, Black women are connected, but their experiences are not the same, "...the connections between U.S. Black women's experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint" (p. 29) "where action and thought inform one another" (p. 30). These connections are essential to ensure that self-definition becomes the narrative of those who have been historically oppressed (Hill Collins, 2000). This is especially true for African American women navigating higher education while in a collegiate honors program. These eight participants and other African American female honors programs participants are connected and while their experiences may be similar, they are not the same. For example, there are four participants (Eshe, Fayola, Amara, and Ramla) whose parents immigrated from African and four whose parents are not African immigrants (Mandisa, Abeni, Kali, and Amani). One similarity is that all of them identify as African American. When asked to describe their culture, the African participants were clear,

...my family's from Ghana. So we don't really have the westernized culture of individualistic society in our house. I have a communal mindset. In Ghana family is a really big thing like when you grow old, your parents grow old, you're not supposed to send them to a nursing home or let them live by themselves because they raised you. So the respectful thing to do is make sure they're taken care of.

(Eshe)

Fayola shared:

...I'm really proud to be Nigerian because, I don't know, they're very high achievers I'd say. They value family, value God. So I really like being part of that culture. They really make you, they really value family, they make you feel at home like whenever I go to Nigeria I always feel out of place because like I don't have an accent, I don't speak the language but when I go with my family they always welcome me and I feel at home even though I don't really live there.

(Fayola)

Asking the same question of the participants whose parents did not immigrate, their understanding was not as clear.

That's an interesting thing to describe because, um. It's interesting. I honestly don't know what my cultural heritage is because yes, I am African American, but there's just so many things that have been lost. I guess I would say that we have soul food. Family is really important and then doing what's right, that's also very important to my family. (Amani)

Kali offered:

My cultural heritage? Someone was just asking [me] about this, like where are you from? And I'm like I wish I knew. So, I mean I just say I'm Black. Don't really know where the roots are from. I guess from, I don't know, I just don't know it kind of weird like obviously I'm Black and I guess I tie that into like when you're raised you just, you listen to certain music, you watch certain movies. (Kali)

While there are similarities in the value of family, the differences between the experiences are striking. It is certainly not that those whose parents did not emigrate from Africa are not proud of their heritage, they may not fully understand the breadth of the history to be able to pass it to their children. Perhaps this is from the lack of African American history curriculum being taught to families not being able to continue the oral history of African Americans that has occurred with previous generations. Regardless of the why, the first-generation Americans from Africa are bringing a renewed spirit to what it means to be African American in America.

Continuing to understand their experiences, one may be able to see that they all come from supportive families, yet their family situations vary. Some grew up in rural towns, others grew up in metropolitan areas. Regardless of how and where they were reared, their experiences led them to an honors program at a PWI. Their paths that led them to this experience have not only shaped who they are but has also assisted in those whose parents did not emigrate to understand more of their African American culture.



So even like going from this diverse high school where I might be the only Black person in my AP class or whatever and coming here, I always joke like I think it's funny that I come to OSSU and actually feel like I learn more about like my Black culture already just because I hang out with them [other African American students] a lot. (Kali)

Regardless of where one learns of her African American heritage it is validating to know that the learning occurs at institutions such as OSSU. It is also important to note that this education happens outside of the classroom in the social spaces where students gather and form support networks.

### **Identity**

Despite the academic accomplishments of African American women over the last half century, it remains uncommon to see a significant number of African American women in a collegiate honors program (Harrison-Cook, 1999). Even if the participants did not see themselves as being in the honors program (yet), they saw themselves as a student at OSSU because of the encouragement they received from others before they entered college. Through those influences, they were able to identify that OSSU had a space for them.

...another course that stood out to me was Advanced Placement (AP) biology.

The teacher I had for this course actually went to OSSU and she talked about how she enjoyed OSSU and how it was more than just like the social aspects but the academics are really challenging and it was really awesome for her because the classes she took. She went into college thinking she wanted to become a physician

assistant but the courses she took and the professors she had inspired her to become a teacher. So that's really cool. (Eshe)

Once they found their space at OSSU, the reality of being one of the few and then choosing how to dedicate their time was something they needed to work through.

I think organizing is very important to having more, more responsibilities and more things to do. So I've really focused on becoming a better organizer and time management skills, I worked on that as well but academically I didn't necessarily prepare. I felt like I was fairly prepared for the honors program, I know that's one thing I do is underestimate myself and I did not think I would be prepared for the program but I realized quickly that I am pretty prepared. (Mandisa)

Kali spoke about balancing her social life and her educational life.

It was more like the social side that like kind of hits you hard. Your parents are not there to ask "like where are you? It's 9:00, come home". You can be out until 2 in the morning and no one's stopping you. Um, I think it was more of balancing all of that than 'oh crap, the classes are hard'. So first semester, I was like, "hey do you need to go out? Should you read instead?" Just mostly like yeah I'll go, but so in the aspect of grades, I think I was prepared. It was more of just the time management with college, because they kind of just tell you oh yeah, professors like you're like you're going to have like two grades in the grade book. Which is funny story but it was not funny at the time. I woke up late for one of my tests. You know, that was no fun. It was the 8:30 class. Yeah, yeah (laughter). But, it's okay. I, it was, still, yeah, it was fine. So yeah just balancing

social life with college was the most thing that I was like, maybe wasn't super prepared. But I feel like no one can really be prepared for that until you're here because no one can really tell you all that. But, lesson learned, to set multiple alarms (laughter). (Kali)

Eshe had this to say about why she became a part of the honors program and how she continues to challenge herself.

Throughout my life I've always taken the classes, I always take classes that are required and they're above the entry level stuff. So I was like why not continue it in college. Why not continue in challenging myself? And going into it I was like honestly there probably are not going to be a lot of Black people but you have to be the first. I don't know how to put this into words but like if you want other people to do what you're doing, not necessarily following you, but be comfortable doing what you're doing, you need to be the first one just like them in the program or that organization so that they know that it's possible and that they aren't afraid to do it. (Eshe)

Building identity as an African American woman may also mean educating others despite their ignorance.

I guess like sometimes you do get the opportunity to educate people. I mean some people think you're the only Black person in here, be our spokesperson for the whole Black race, but. But other times, people are just ignorant and they're actually asking out of curiosity and wanting to learn so I don't mind that I get to educate other people sometimes. (Kali)

Kali's willingness to guide those who are curious, yet who also may be ignorant assists in contributing to being comfortable with her identity as a Black woman attending a PWI.

A good portion of the discussion with these participants has had to do with them being the only. However, there needs to be consideration of how they are attending OSSU with almost 50,000 other students. Mandisa said, "Being a student, you know sometimes people think that you're left behind because there's so many students here, but with the traditions and all the activities it's hard to be left behind". The pomp and circumstance of being a college student at a large PWI is also not lost on the participants and they are also enjoying their time at OSSU. The pride that the participants had for OSSU was infectious as they talked about how they decided to attend OSSU. Kali had this to say:

So honestly it was between OSSU or the other [state] school. I was like I'll go visit there and see which one I like more. So I visited OSSU first and saw how many people greeted me. There is a tradition at OSSU if you say "rumble" [not the actual word] everyone will turn and say rumble back to you. Honestly, that like got me. Everyone was so friendly and everyone was just like "rumble!". Just the school pride. Like I've always been like pretty big on school pride. So school pride was a big part [in choosing OSSU]. You know the whole rivalry between OSSU [the other state institution]. I kind of like to talk trash sometimes at sporting events if we're not doing well. And honestly, I'm real big on school pride. (Kali)

Finding balance as an African American woman attending a PWI while being a part of an honors program is critical to their success. Yes, they often are the only African American woman and may feel isolated at times, however, like their successes, their identity is layered as well.

## **Tenet 4 – Intellectualism**

### **Theme 4 – I Belong**

*I'm not the average girl from your video  
And I ain't built like a supermodel  
But I learned to love myself unconditionally  
Because I am a queen  
I not the average girl from your video  
My worth is not determined by the price of my clothes  
No matter what I'm wearing I will always be  
India.Arie (Arie, Broady & Sanders, 2001).*

### **Finding their Spot**

Hill Collins' (2000) definition of intellectualism is

“For Black women intellectuals of diverse ages, social classes, educational backgrounds, and occupations consists of asking the right questions and investigating all dimensions of a Black Woman’s standpoint with and for African-American women” (p. 33).

One dimension of the understanding relates to the physical space that African American women occupy. The immediate space where these individuals live, work and thrive is another element to understand as this is the space where their intellect is nurtured.

Without a nurturing spirit intellect cannot succeed. The OSSU honors program has created a space where these participant’s intellect can not only grow but can be seen.

Amani spoke about why she chose to become a part of the honors program:

One of my goals while I'm here at OSSU is to do the 4+1 program where you get your bachelor's in four years and then your master's in one. And that was one of the main reasons I applied to the honors program here. Because you don't really have that option if you're just a regular engineering student. Also, we get to register early and with me being like the student worker on campus, that's like really helpful because I can sit there and like pick my academic schedule and then like plan my work schedule around that. (Amani)

In speaking about how her intellectual identity comes through Amani also talked about how she is able to apply what she has learned from participating in the honors program.

Knowledge is also very important because in some of my classes we have discussions and I guess it's just like really good to know stuff and to use the knowledge that you do have and to be able to apply that in class. It shows professors really that you actually care about what you're learning. So that's another good thing that I think I have within me that can be applied to like the honors program. I guess my relationship with my professors are closer than if I were not in engineering honors classes. (Amani)

As previously discussed, there are layers of success that these participants have utilized to achieve at OSSU. Applying those layers is what assists in allowing the strength of these participants to shine through. Through the support and guidance of the honors program, participants ensure that they get what they need from OSSU.

My professors here at OSSU they've been really like passionate about what they're teaching. They really explain things to you and well they really explain

things to me in a way that I understand and then being able to like go to their office hours and talk one on one with them. They just get to know you on a more personal level, and so they can like sometimes translate into the classroom because they'll like teach a certain way or they'll like understand you. So I guess my educational experience here at OSSU so far has been pretty good. (Eshe)

It does not take an honors program to help students understand that they can directly interact with their professors outside of the classroom, but for many of these students it has assisted in building their confidence and educational growth. The support and guidance in breaking down the perceived barriers between student and professor assists in these participants finding their niche. Concerning her connections with her professors through the honors program, Kali said, "I guess also being successful is like you can kind of ask more questions that makes sense and it usually like the honors professor will explore that with you and so I think that's learning more".

It is only within the last 50 years that the African American community is not contained within a few miles of one another (Hill Collins, 2000). Segregation, separate but equal and Jim Crow laws made the Black community become almost self-sufficient. Through segregation a collective spirit developed and greatly assisted the development of the community (Hill Collins, 2000). Now that those doors of American higher education are [mostly] open, the spirit remains, however, now it exists differently. None of the eight participants personally know one another, yet they are connected, or they may be familiar with one another but did not realize that they were part of the honors program.

When I got into honors, I didn't think there'd be any other African American women in honors and I've recently found out that there are some. I'm not exactly sure of the number, but there are some that I hadn't know that were there, which is really nice. (Mandisa)

These eight contemporary Black intellectuals are creating their own dialogues of what it means to be an African American female intellectual and to assist in pushing forward African American women (Hill Collins, 2000).

In the future I hope that I'll be able to say I was an inspiration to girls who are pursuing an interest in STEM especially Black girls because I know back in high school, I was the president of our Women in Science and Engineering program and we had an outreach program where we'd go to the middle school right next door to my high school and we'd talk to the girls. And there were little Black girls there that were like oh engineering is too hard. And I was like no, no, no, no. You can do this. And like I want them to be able to see that if I can do it, they can do it as well. That's something that really, that I also keep in the back of my mind, especially right now when I'm going through college, because I want to be able to help them in the future. (Amani)

The building of intellect also leads individuals to not only discover their strengths but to also apply them. About her best experience in the honors program Amani had this to say:

I would definitely say it's right now, the robot project. We all got assigned like groups and we have to build this robot and program it to do certain tasks. And right now, my group is really great. It's pretty evenly split between female and



male but I am the only Black person, as I expected, I have a white female who is in my group and then there are two south Asian guys in my group. One of them is also doing Chemical Engineering, one is doing Computer Science and the other, the girl is doing Civil Engineering. So, the Computer Science guy he really focuses on the programming language, I do a lot of the management of our tasks and like, they're written in stuff that we have to do and then the other two they just focus mainly on doing the building. I do not build anything, I'm good at like looking at stuff and telling them, 'Oh, you should try this. And like I'm able to look at some code and say, 'Oh you can do this, instead of doing this to make like more efficient.' As my part in the group, but the group itself, it's just so diverse and we all just really wanna get the best grade we can on this group project and account to 70% of our grade. So we're really trying hard and like, we've just got a really good, really good connections and we all to like know where we stand in the group and we can go in between then, just like really come together and to like meet the project the best we can meet. That, that's been a really good experience [for me] in the engineering honors program. (Amani)

As Amani discusses her successful group work with robotics, Abeni discusses her disdain for group work, even though for one of her projects she and her group were successful:

I honestly hate doing honors classes. That is another difficult thing because when you're in the honors section of a course you always always always have to do some sort of group project. And I hate group projects because it's so hard to get people together. There's only one group probably ever liked that was in my

accounting course and I already knew the people and we all were hardworking we all of us maybe get the project done. So we actually finished the project a week early. So we got a 100 on the assignment and that's the only to this day group project that I've ever liked. Everyone else someone is always dragging their feet and someone never shows up. I never liked group projects. Some classes, actually it depends on the professor whether it's a group project or just some extra project because my entomology course I just had to do a project by myself. Still it was annoying but it was better than a group project. So there's always some extra coursework that I have to do but I guess that's why you have to do because otherwise everyone would be taking an honors component if it was easy. (Abeni)

No, honors is not easy, however, even if there is strife in getting the work done the work gets done. The experiences that the participants have had while being at OSSU and in the honors program will support their intellect as they continue with their lives. Even though Abeni does not like group projects, she will accomplish them. Without the continued nurturing of their intellect by the honors program, they may not be ready to accept the challenges that will be presented to them in the years to come. The confidence in themselves will also further build on their intellect. According to Eshe about this she said, "Decisions we make now are going to affect us later in life."

### **Taking a Risk with the Honors Program**

Several of the participants thought they had an idea of what an honors program would be, and once they were in the honors program it was different from what they thought. Amara says,

I think I might have expected it to be more organized. Meaning that I might have expected it to be more like this is your honors cohort and you take all your classes together and you walk through college together and it wasn't like those very, very like everyone just kind of get their own thing.

Fayola says, "I thought it would be like I don't know the class that keep on piling or go on top of you but here, it's just kind of like supplemental and I don't know just more opportunities I think." Even if students are not first-generation college students, they may not know all of the benefits or nuances of honors programs and how impactful it can be on their college career. This may further contribute to the small number of African American students being enrolled. Further, the honors program experience may be able to counter the beliefs that some college experiences will be cut-throat. For example, Amani said,

To be honest it's not at like what I expected. I didn't really expect it to be a lot, lot harder than it actually is, but so far, it has not been--I kind of expect it to be like my high school, my high school was like really competitive. And cutthroat and be like no one wants to help you. So coming here and then being in the program, everyone's like so happy and helpful and it's just completely different from what I initially expected. (Amani)

Once the participants found that the program wasn't what they expected, they were able to settle in, do their work and take advantage of the opportunities presented to them. For example, Amara interned with two major Fortune 500 companies M & M Mars and Coca-Cola while she attended OSSU. While these opportunities may have presented

themselves without the honors program, the assistance of the program played a key role. The confidence of these individuals was already there, however, with the support of the honors program, they are able to be firm in their understanding of themselves and how they wanted to achieve their goals.

In respect to honors, I think something like the--- part of my identity is that I'm just like a hard worker and like --- that--- like I'm --- just kind of just like my confidence in my ability like that part of who I am like having that confidence is important to me because I'm going to be underestimated. So, if I was insecure in like my own abilities. It would be easy to believe what other people thought of me (Ramla).

The participants are offering a different view of the world of African American women in collegiate honors programs (Hill Collins, 2000). Their world view is one where there may be barriers, but they are barriers that they not only have overcome but will continue be able to overcome future obstacles if presented with them.

You know another thing about being a woman in engineering is when I tell people that like I'm a petroleum engineer, they look at me like wow do you want to do petroleum? I'm like I want to do petroleum. I don't know, and they expect me to want to do you like theater or something. I don't know I don't know but they're like very surprised. But for like the white males when to say like, oh I'm petroleum they're like oh that's so cool but when I'm like I'm petroleum, they're like that wow so cool that you want to do petroleum. Why is it any different that he wants to do petroleum and I want to do petroleum? We're all in it for the same

things, so why is it different that I want to do what he wants to do? Definitely like that kind of thing. I mean it's not that I don't like people that are like wow that's cool, but it's just like why is it any different you know? (Fayola)

Fayola's comments are reminiscent of the beliefs that African American women are less than (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006; Zamani, 2003). This flawed belief system causes African American women to stand very firm in their beliefs about themselves. No longer can it be assumed that Black women are in the liberal arts and not in roles such as petroleum engineering. Even if the honors program did not instill the ability for these women to know their worth, it has helped to fortify their confidence by providing space for them to simply be and become. Mandisa said about her experience,

“I think it has helped tremendously. I'm not a very loud person, I don't really speak that much if I don't have to, and through honors and all of the discussion-based classes I've been forced to come out of my comfort zone and speak up a little bit more in which I think will really help me”.

### **Social Location**

The significance of social location to the participants' stories is that their intellectual work now will impact them and others within their sphere of influence for generations to come. The study of social location is relatively new, however, Daynes (2007) offers a clear definition, “the dynamic positions we occupy in society based on our social background, social characteristics and social experiences; it is where we stand now, where we come from and the possibilities of where we are going” (p. 5). All of their

stories show how they made their way to OSSU through the support of family, friends and through their own self-direction.

Yes, my [high] school is not very diverse. And so, that proved to be a common theme of an issue throughout my years, worst in middle and high school and so I always had to do twice as much work just to get the same recognition as someone else. And so, through that, I've worked really, really hard on my academics really hard and that kind of pushed me to I guess study harder, try to do better on my tests which in turn at the time was not fun but getting to college it seemed easy cause I didn't have to do near as much work to do. (Mandisa)

Mandisa is one of the participants that clearly said that she did not fully identify herself as an African American woman. "I do not put myself in a box ... I don't box myself in and to be a woman in my opinion that's to be very strong, caring and supportive." This is an interesting point as she does consider herself to be an African American woman as she volunteered to participate in this study. The juxtaposition of Mandisa not wishing to check a box concerning her identity, yet she knew that in high school she had to work harder than her counterparts for the same academic recognition. Additionally, she does indicate that she does wish to see others like her at OSSU.

A big challenge is you don't see a lot of people like you. And in my classes last year some of them ranged from twenty-five to three-hundred people and so most of them I maybe saw five other African-American women total, and that's one of the struggles. Not saying that I necessarily need that, but it's always nice to have

someone that looks like you that you can relate to in your classes, so that's one big thing. (Mandisa)

Considering today's African American female college student and how she develops comfort within her own social location, it is interesting to understand how these individuals may not directly want to check a box concerning their identity. However, they do realize the significance of being an African American woman at a PWI and also wish they more often saw and interacted with other African American women. While Mandisa deals with her identity and seeking other African American women she talks about how being alone makes her stronger.

That can also be a benefit it makes you stronger of being alone not seeing people like you learn to be very independent, you're not reliant on a certain group of people and it kind of helps you accept other cultures more. I found that myself I've learned to get along with other people just by having a lot of other people that aren't like me here. And as well as the negatives that comes with it, I just think it helps you to become stronger person because you're gonna face that kind of stuff in life as well. And if you have experience now dealing with it, you'll know how to handle it appropriately later. (Mandisa)

There is one experience that all eight participants shared, living in the honors residence hall. This singular experience is what one of the participants (Amara) called "the glue" to the honors program, "the glue that held us together was living together." From this lens, we are able to see how all of the participants viewed a part of their social location of OSSU. Their one or two years of living with other honors program students

assisted the eight participants in not only understanding they were one of a few African Americans in that space but assisted in helping them realize that being one of a few may be difficult, however, they would be able to successfully navigate those spaces.

So, I felt closer to my honors people because I lived in the dorm with almost all honors people, but then coming to live off campus. If you're not in an honors class or if you don't stay with connected with your honors friends, it's a little bit harder to maintain that culture you had when you were a freshman. So that's how I feel about that. The culture of it, it was really friendly as a freshman, and not saying that it's not friendly, I just feel, maybe it's me personally. I feel a little more distant than from my honors community, because we're not required to live together anymore and this semester. (Eshe)

One of the identifying factors that several of the participants mentioned about OSSU is how conservative an institution it is. Even if there is a significant number of liberals at OSSU living in the honors residence hall, the overarching consensus with the participants was that conservatives were very prevalent at OSSU and yet they managed to exist and live together. Living together brought situations to the participants that they may not have experienced otherwise. For example, Amara became a sophomore advisor and chose to stay in the hall for a second year, which is something she did not have to do.

But the biggest thing that had an impact was living in the honor's dorm. So because of that I like have a different group of friends, even with people I know till this day was people I live in that dorm with. And then my second year I was



adviser in that dorm so like it became a pretty big part of my experience I mean again I'm like it was weird because I never truly felt like I was part of them.

(Amara)

Amara indicating that she never truly felt like she was part of “them” may mean several things to her. She sought to continue to seek opportunities to become part of the honors community so that she could fit in. Whether or not she ever felt that she fit in may be irrelevant because the experience in the honors hall provided her with friends that she remains connected with. Her social location empowered her to not solely accept that she did not fit it, but she made it so that she would not allow herself to remain static. By Amara remaining dynamic within the honors residence community, she showed that she belongs in the honors program and at OSSU. Now that she has had time to reflect on her honors experience, she realizes that she could have used her voice to more strongly advocate for herself and for other honors residents.

I just again I didn't say anything I didn't challenge things I should have challenged people do not like that Obama was president at that time. It was definitely a really tough place to be in that time. But it was tough. And like I think but I didn't really get it because I was in honor's, I didn't get as much as into like other like African American communities because I was in the honors community and I should have probably done a better job with that so again I was just trying to blend in with these people as much as I could. There were so many things about who I was that they were fundamentally against everyday. (Amara)

Regardless of what she could have done in that situation, she has taken those experiences to assist her in being confident as he moves forward in her life.

Abeni was a participant that openly shared her academic struggles as she worked to remain in good standing with the honors program.

I didn't do so well my first semester here as a freshman I feel like it was probably just I had taken dual credit classes senior year of high school so I was kind of getting used to a college level class work. But I only took six hours per semester. So I think being thrown into doing 12 hours, I think it was homework load I don't know. I just didn't do very well and I earned a 2.62 too. So I actually put myself out. I got kicked out of business honors. By the next year or my second semester I got a 3.25 but it wasn't enough because I needed to have at least 3.25 [cumulative] to keep my scholarship so I officially lost that. And right now I'm on probation for university honors. But and then last semester I got 3.5 so I'm most likely going to stay in university honors just because like I'm clearly on an upward track it's just because in my first semester here I am significantly held back from a lot of things that now that I'm definitely like used to it I'm pretty sure I'm going to get a 3.25. Hopefully more hopefully 4.0. The goal obviously but I'm really pushing for at least 3.5. Can keep that upward track. I'd like to graduate at least cum laude not thank you lordy. (Abeni)

Abeni's self-determination can be seen in how she processed why she was asked to not participate in the honors program. She worked to prepare herself in high school for college-level work, however, when she arrived the class load was too much for her. Now

she is readjusting to continue with her goal in the honors program and graduate with a 3.5 GPA or higher. Abeni's social location may be understood as she sees where she is and where she wants to go in terms of her and her eligibility in the honors program. Her dynamic is moving forward and not being deterred by a tough academic year and making adjustments to prepare for re-entry into the program as she believes she belongs at OSSU and will earn her degree there. The theory of intellectualism is multi-faceted as it pertains to more than someone's intellect (Horvat & O'Connor, 2006). It also has to do with how one does not rely on their intellect alone, they realize that there are responsibilities within the sphere of being an intellectual (Hill Collins, 2000). By taking risks of participating in the honors program to be one of the only or one of the few, these African American female participants have developed a social location that suits them. They realize that what they get out of their education and life is largely up to them. Taking the opportunity to challenge themselves academically by being a part of the honors program has supported the participants in their confidence in knowing that they have a place not only at OSSU but in greater society.

### **Tenet 5 – Change**

#### **Theme 5 – [Dynamic] Black Girl Magic**

*To be young, gifted and Black,  
Oh what a lovely precious dream  
To be young, gifted and Black,  
Open your heart to what I mean  
When you feel really low  
Yeah, there's a great truth you should know  
When you're young, gifted and Black  
Your soul's intact (Simone, 1970)*

Relating change to BFT, Hill Collins (2000) says, "...for Black feminist thought to operate effectively within Black feminism as a social justice project, both must remain dynamic" (p. 30). The reverence that BFT has for Black feminism is clear. Both are dependent on the other to evolve and grow to address the needs of African American women. As it is with BFT and Black feminism, these eight participants and others like them are dependent upon American higher education to remain dynamic and support them in their intellectual development. The only way for them to be dynamic is for the systems around them to be strong agents of change. Examining the system(s) that surround the participants is also important to examine, in particular the honors program at OSSU.

### **[Dynamic] Black Girl Magic**

Within the 5,200 acres of OSSU, the honors program has developed a climate where not only can the participant's Black girl magic can grow, but they are able to see their own growth. About charting her own growth, Amani says,

I also think, um, knowledge is also very important. Because in some of my classes, we have like discussions and I guess it's just like really good to know stuff and to um use the knowledge that you do have to and be able to apply that in class. Also, if you're like in your class, the Engineering Honors class, and you like are able to learn the material the best of your ability like you actually understand it, then you're actually successful. It doesn't really matter what your grade is in the class, I think that as long as you yourself understand it, then that's being successful. (Amani)

Understanding how the OSSU honors program has evolved to support its students is also critical to understanding why these eight students have developed their sense of belonging. OSSU's honors program has worked to define what some may consider differences between honors students. According to Momar (pseudonym) the Associate Director, here is how he considers those differences.

...if you think of giftedness as psychological difference and you're doing the sort of enrichment kind of things just because you want to do it, there's this intrinsic motivation. I'm learning because this is the thing that I want to learn and this also explains why sometimes gifted students are difficult to deal within a classroom situation. Because if you can't convince them that this is something that's worth learning, they're just not going to do it, right? As opposed to a high-achieving student who has an external locus of motivation if they're doing this for the gold star or to please somebody or something like that. That's what I'm seeing as the difference between those two terms in particular. (Momar)

The significance of Momar sharing this information is that we are able to understand more about how OSSU's honors program approaches supporting their students. Further, Momar states,

...for the high achievers, it provides some structure and it provides recognition. It provides those external markers of achievement that the high achiever is looking for. For the gifted person who's intrinsically motivated and is looking for somebody to support them in chasing every crazy idea that they have, it also supports that type of student. (Momar)

Linking the construction of the honors program to how the participants feel about being an African American woman in the program is insightful.

It means to me that, let's see. It's just, honestly I can't think of any other word than cool, I know it's kind of like a slang term to use and not really professional, but it's a really cool experience because you don't really see a lot of African Americans at the school or in the honors program. You see a lot of men in there because OSSU is really good at bringing in a lot of males who want to be in the STEM program, and there are also a lot of women and females in the program are STEM majors. As an African American woman, you don't really see a lot of people who like you on campus, but then when we see one another, it's like, and it's possible to do it. It's not impossible and it's a really good experience. So I think it's a really cool experience to be in something like this, like the capstone project ... could ultimately if you do service project, who knows it could become an organization that runs on for years even after you graduate and stuff like that in research. You can take that research beyond your undergrad and it could make it your whole life, so I think it's a really amazing experience. (Eshe)

Assisting these participants to envision well beyond their time at OSSU is something that not all college students have the privilege to do. To have these participants be excited about their future and leaving their mark, not only on OSSU but society, is magic. Additionally, they know that they may be special, but they are not the only ones that deserve to be a part of the program. The dynamic aspect of this is that the participants

consistently are thinking about how to continue the growth of the program by supporting others.

I don't think that means I'm a special Black girl, I think there are other Black girls who are just like me and who don't know enough about what's going on that could take advantage of it [honors]. I feel like there are so many more Black people that could be in honors. If it was marketed correctly, and if Black people were brought up more to like believe in themselves. I don't think I'm special being a Black woman. I think I have value but special, I don't know if that's what I will say (Ramla).

Fayola continues to clarify how being the only gives her pride and enables her to represent African Americans.

So I find it to be... I don't know. It doesn't really feel any different I guess. I mean I don't know what it's like being in honors at an HBCU. I guess I don't know. There aren't many other African American woman in the program with me but, I mean there aren't many African American woman in engineering period. I guess I've gotten used to being like the only one so it's not like a big difference to me I would say. But it feels good to be like the only one. It makes me feel like I'm there representing everyone so people that yeah, see it's a possibility. (Fayola)

Amara reminds us that strength also comes from standing alone. "I think just again, you have to stand alone. You have to be able to stand strong and just be emotionally strong because often, we are the only ones".

These participants are celebrating who they are as they continue to recognize they are not the only Black women that deserve to be in an honors program. About her experience Ramla says,

I think just not like not seeing other Black people in honors, it kind of molded me in a way that like when I get to where I'm trying to get to, like I need to bring more people with me because it's like I don't like being the only one because I don't think I'm the only one qualified to be here. So just like I know how my grandma was with me, I know I'm going to be like that to have my own children and grandchildren but I also like kind of want to be in a mentorship program or something like that because there's a lot of opportunities that are available in the honors program that I think a lot of students could benefit from and also just being here at OSSU like the services and things that honors like you can take honors classes and not even be in honors here and I feel like students especially Black students have no idea about that and so just like being more of communicative with the opportunities that exist.

A part of the Black girl magic is also from how the honors program has provided an opportunity for the participants to simply be able to critically think about their education and how their education will assist them in entering their chosen career field.

It's almost like, oh actually like open the door just some questions you end up with more questions. So like, getting introduced to some stuff like I start asking "Do I want a minor? Do I want to double major?" Like it kinda hurt your brain a little bit trying to figure out all the steps you wanna go through. And I'm so now



like I'm still not a 100% sure [about a minor or double majoring]. Right now I just know I like my political science degree but I know I wanna add something to that eventually. So I guess in that way it might have changed like my plans. (Kali)

As Kali mentioned, the honors program has assisted in opening doors for the participants. While those doors may be open, the participants also understand that they have the option to perhaps not go through those open doors.

I think in way it definitely has but at first I wanted to pursue a master's degree in petroleum engineering, but after speaking to some - not academic advisers, but professors of practice, such as my drilling professor, and other professors I've spoken too, they told me that it's not really necessary. I told you this before, how it wasn't really necessary and just gaining that perspective on it. But then the engineering honors program allows you to complete a masters in one extra year. So that's another, I guess, kind of perk of being in the engineering honors program, that you can do a masters in one year. So now I'm kind of stuck between, like, should I do it because I have the opportunity to do it in one year or should I listen to my advisers and just not do it [laugh]. So I'm kind of flipped between that, but if I end up getting that master's program, I probably won't be in petroleum. It might be mechanical engineering but I'm not sure I guess. I'll keep on going through my journey. I'll keep asking people that have more answers (Fayola).

Celebrating the accomplishments of Black women simply does not happen often enough in American society and that is why the tag of #BlackGirlMagic became so

popular. What a privilege it is for some of these participants to be stuck in having to decide if they are going to earn a master's degree or begin their career. That's the magic of the honors program, providing opportunities for the participants that they did not know about. By creating an atmosphere of continual forward thinking these participants may always have the desire to accomplish more for themselves and to ensure they are not standing alone in those opportunities, as they will bring others with them.

### **Summary – Go Get It**

*It's like You lookin' through a telescope you see where you gonna be  
Growin' gettin' better you're not the person they see  
Can't be mad at the things you've been through, 'cause they built your muscle  
Now you're stronger than you've ever been, they can't stop your hustle  
Yo faith ain't never small that's what brought you this far  
See you got your dreams and you got your prayers and you got you God  
He gonna take you there  
See everybody has a season and I've believe this one's your's  
'Cause you've been working, waiting, this what you've been praying for  
Go get it, go get it, go get your blessing  
Go get it, go get it, go get it  
It's time yo, It's time yo, It's time your time  
(Campbell, Campbell, & Campbell, 2012)*

Harrison-Cook (1999) noted that Black students were hesitant about becoming a part of an honors program. This research is seeking to change that, and with the assistance of the participants, that may happen. Through the lived experiences of these eight participants, we see that there are positive and negative aspects to being an African American female at a PWI. For this study, it seems as if the positives are outweighing the negative experiences that the participants may have encountered. Even when confronting racist micro-aggressions, the participants have chosen to listen, understand and teach rather than being hurt and becoming withdrawn. That is Black girl magic. To be able to

change and modify for others to see what the possibilities are. Additionally, by being a part of the honors program, they have been given opportunities that they may not have otherwise been offered. Mandisa said, “For anyone else debating on whether honors is worth it or worth to try, I highly suggest it. I think it can really help you and just in general strengthen you as a person, so yeah.” So yeah, for all those young Black women wishing to excel and be supported, go get it, enter an honors program in college.

## CHAPTER SIX. AYA

Chapter six is named for the West African Adinkra symbol Aya which means one who is resourceful and endures, which is exactly how I see these participants. Their resourcefulness will support them as they endure through their lives . Eight women—women who identify as African American, daughters, and college students in an honors program at a PWI—chose to participate in this study. This study was designed to share their experiences, understand how they were supported as they prepared for their college education, and contribute to research concerning African American women in higher education. Initially, the title of this dissertation was going to be *The Outsider Within*, which is taken directly from BFT. However, as an understanding of the data progressed, it became clear that the participants were not outsiders looking inside; they were very much inside and enjoying (for the most part) being at OSSU as well as their honors program experience.

This is important to note because of the juxtaposition of much of the research concerning African American women. Research that includes African American women discusses the barriers these individuals may face concerning higher education access and retention (Allen et al., 1991). Additionally, the research may discuss these women from a deficit-based lens and not an asset-based lens. Not portraying these individuals from an asset-based lens may continue to contribute to the perpetuation of the negative

stereotypes concerning African American women (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). This research firmly planted itself in understanding and highlighting the assets of African American women in collegiate honors programs. It also sought to share their successes with Black girls who may question their academic abilities or be hesitant about being in programs where they are the only African American or one of a few. As African American student numbers increase in programs such as honors, the issue of being the only or one of a few will dissipate. The stories of the Infinite Eight will also show bright Black girls that they can do it too.

### **Discussion of Findings and General Implications**

The findings are tied directly to the tenets of BFT and the themes that emerged based on the data collected for this study. The main questions for this study were

1. What are the academic paths experienced by African American women that have prepared them for entrance and success within a collegiate honors program?
2. What are the lived experiences of African American women who currently are or recently have been enrolled in an undergraduate collegiate honors program?

The questions were designed to develop an understanding of the path and the experiences of the African American female participants from the OSSU honors program. Through the research, the questions also sought to provide individuals information on how to continue preparing students for opportunities such as honors. In the later part of this Chapter, I link two Adinkra symbols Aya (symbol of endurance and resourcefulness) and Sankofa (symbol of return and get it) to further highlight the continued connection that Africa and its history continues to have on African American culture.

## **Empowerment and Freedom**

Research concerning African American women and their success in higher education has discussed that they are responsible for their educational experience (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). This may indicate that higher education institutions are held innocent in regard to retention and academic success of these individuals (Allen et al., 1991). Placing a significant portion of the educational responsibility upon the student rather than the institution is becoming an outdated practice (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). Even if the responsibility has mostly rested with the participants in this study, they were able to find a path that worked for them and to succeed at OSSU.

The connection between African American women and the women that impact them is a strong bond (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Settles, 2006). This bond is perhaps the most significant in these individuals' lives because ideally, empowerment begins at home from those who provide unconditional love and acceptance. By utilizing the lessons instilled from their family, and in particular from their maternal influences, the participants translated their empowerment to acts of freedom. Furthermore, for many of the participants, their time before they entered college was impactful because they took advanced placement courses and pushed themselves towards college preparation courses. This, in part, ensured that they would be college ready as they prepared to enter OSSU, which contributed to their feelings of empowerment.

## **Tension and Viewing Campus Life**

The participants discussed the tension they felt of being visible and not being visible on campus. In some respects, the participants did not mind always being visible, and some even went out of their way to be visible on campus. The tension also came from being seen as an African American female and being challenged by their colleagues to see if they were qualified to occupy those academic spaces. As participants dealt with how they believed they were treated on campus, one student indicated that through her Christian identity, she was able to hold quiet an identity that is not as easily visible, like her race and gender. The view of campus for the participants is not necessarily one of hostility but one where they may feel exposed and unable to hide. Therefore, that may be why participants do not share all the pieces of their identity, which contributes to navigating the tension they feel by being an African American woman at OSSU (Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Another method participants utilized to navigate campus was the way in which they chose to be recognized and stand out. One of those ways was to maintain high academic standards. The participants' professors may remember them because of their being the only or one of a few in their classes, but the participants were also recognized for their excellent academic work. The academic focus of the participants, paired with their success strategies, allowed them to navigate the mostly white spaces they experience at OSSU. This navigation is important to note because how the students saw themselves directly relates to how the campus culture embraced them. Several of the participants indicated that maintaining their high grades was important to them,

especially by being part of the honors program. Maintaining high grades may be directly related to ensuring they remain in high regard by their professors (Davis, 2018). There is tension with being visible and the question of what happens when one is not visible (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007).

Higher education institutions have long strategized on how to properly socialize students, especially students of color, into the campus culture. For example, summer bridge programs, such as the one hosted by the Meyerhoff Scholars Program, work to ensure that students not only make a strong transition into college but receive the academic support they need as well (Maton, Hrabowski, & Schmitt, 2000). Without focused programs to bring students into a campus culture, some African American students enrolled at a PWI may feel as if their heritage does not fit neatly into their campus culture, and this may be particularly true for African American women (Howard-Hamilton & Morelon-Quainoo, 2011). From racial epithets to questions about their hair, African American women work to navigate spaces that were not designed for them (Seo & Hinton, 2009). Regardless of for whom the space was designed, African American women continually work to be included and recognized within those spaces (Seo & Hinton, 2009).

The tension may continue to be problematic for African American female students if they feel as if they need to choose their heritage or become fully immersed in their school's culture (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). The participants have shown that they love being a student at OSSU, and they continue to hold true to their African American heritage. Some indicated that they learned more about their heritage from their other



African American peers at OSSU. Knowing the history of one's people may be important for African Americans as they consider which type of collegiate institution to attend, whether that be a PWI or an HBCU. There are many opinions as to which type of institution may better share information on African American heritage. Regardless of those opinions, it is important to note that the participants in this study did continue to learn about their African American history.

### **Connections and Self-Identification**

This study shared the life experiences of eight non-homogenous African American women in a collegiate honors program (Hill Collins, 2000). There were four women whose parents were born in America, and there were four participants whose parents emigrated from Africa. The differences among the group need to be recognized so that the many individual identities of African American women continue to grow and be shared (Hill Collins, 2000). A portion of their self-definition can be seen through the differences in how they dealt with racial microaggressions. Some participants chose to educate the ignorance they experienced. There is no right or wrong way in confronting racial microaggressions; it is up to each participant to decide for herself what her action will be. Understanding the self-definition of these participants further examines the complexity of the thought processes that African American women process every day (Zamani, 2003).

Often, the literature that has spoken about African Americans being the only or one of a few in academic situations discusses the negative aspects of being the only in that isolating space (Howard-Hamilton, Morelon-Quianoo, Johnson, Winkle-Wagner, &

Santiago, 2011). This study provided the different viewpoint that being the only also comes with advantages. Several participants spoke about how they were comfortable with being the only African American in many of the spaces at OSSU. To add to the narrative, one participant felt as though she were a representative for other African American women because they were not able to be with her. There is an important distinction to point out here: The participant is a representative but she does not speak for all African American women. Further, she and other participants in this study realized they are not the only ones that may be eligible to be a part of the honors program and seek to bring other African American women into the program, which is a critical understanding for the participants to not only discuss but also actualize (Seo & Hinton, 2009). This constitutes another important distinction for African American women they move from being invisible in academic spaces to being visible.

### **Intellectualism and I Belong**

The honors program at OSSU provided the space and time to nurture the intellect of these eight participants. Nurturing their intellect also supported these participants in developing their sense of belonging at OSSU. Considering the number of students of color who may feel as if they do not belong and therefore drop out of their PWI, understanding the nuance of developing an environment where students feel they not only belong but also can prosper is critical to building a sustainable model for the success and retention of African American female college students (Allen et al., 1991). Whereas the honors program may not be able to change the entire campus culture, it can make the campus culture stop and take notice about the community it created that supports or does

not support its Black female students (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). One may liken it to the parable of the mosquito. The mosquito may not be able to impact the entire body, however it can make the body itch.

These eight participants are .00016% of the student population at OSSU. Although this number may be isolating to some students, these participants did not consider themselves isolated, and that is significant to note. Regardless of some of the situations in which they found themselves, they engaged and moved forward. For example, the participants utilized their power by voicing their opinions when having difficult conversations concerning social justice issues. Using their voices to bring awareness of African American experiences at and beyond OSSU makes a significant impact on their campus culture (Hill Collins, 2000). Regardless if their campus colleagues are prepared to listen and understand those unique African American experiences, their experiences make a difference. The realization that these eight participants have a sense of belonging at OSSU is significant, however it is made more powerful because they advocate for themselves (Alina, 2015; Hill Collins, 2000).

### **Change and (Dynamic) Black Girl Magic**

The magic comes from the participants charting their own growth and being confident in who they are as individuals. This is especially true because in their academic setting, they do not often see faces that look like theirs (Davis, 2018; Harrison,-Cook, 1999). Many of the participants may not fully understand the breadth of their magic until they have left OSSU, however that does not mean their magic is any less impactful. By these eight women sharing their stories, other young Black women may know how to

more successfully prepare and then navigate their PWI. Their stories will also inform PWIs as they continue to ensure they meet the educational needs of African American women (Davis, 2018). Meeting their educational needs means taking an in-depth look at institutional racism, which has narrowed the path for African American women in not only gaining access to American higher education but also being overrepresented in special education and not honors education (Ford, 1998).

The OSSU honors program has purposefully developed an environment that supports the growth and critical thinking of its participants. The work to develop an inclusive environment for students cannot be taken for granted, especially within American higher education (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). Constructing or reconstructing an environment for students and with students is a change within American higher education that is an ongoing strategy in strategic planning (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). The model of shifting the focus from the students being responsible for their education to the educators and institutions' responsibility in meeting the needs of students is change that will continue to benefit African American women. The magic occurs when the developed structures change and take into consideration all of the students, especially those who have been historically marginalized. The work of inclusion occurring at higher education institutions like OSSU is seeking to take away burdens that have largely been placed upon the student. Moving the burden from the student to the institution will assist in moving Black women from isolation into the mainstream discussions where they deserve to be.

## **Specific Implications for Research, Theory and Practice**

### **Their Walk**

It was no accident that these eight participants found their way to the OSSU honors program. Examining the paths each of the participants took as they entered college is important to understand. It is also important for individuals within a student's circle of influence to remember how much impact they have on a student's life. It may be difficult to comprehend that one (simple) comment of encouragement or doubt regarding a student's ability may accelerate or disrupt their path to college. The support these participants received grounded them in setting their goal of not only entering college but also excelling academically (Hill Collins, 2000). At some point, the participants were taught and then actualized what it took to not only access a college education but also utilize their talents and be high achievers at OSSU. Even for students who felt as if they were blessed by God, they still needed to be provided with an understanding of the steps needed for college entrance. As educators, we must continue to be vigilant in both providing information for students and ensuring the information is consistent and clear for them to follow.

As described in Chapter 5, these women were methodical in how they approached their high school education. One of their methods was to take higher-level courses while in high school so that their focus could be on continuing to strive for a high GPA and achieve the benchmarks required of the honors program. This strategy allowed them to find balance and experience a freedom that many African American female college students may not experience at a large PWI (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). As an upper-

classmen in high school, the concept of delaying their gratification of taking easier courses allowed the participants to be more satisfied and confident with their college experience. They made sacrifices before entering college that assisted in their developing a sense of freedom.

The participants also recognized that they were not the only Black women who deserved to be in an honors program. Additionally, they also recognized that it may be up to them to assist in increasing the numbers of African American women in honors. With this realization, a powerful connection could be made between the Black participants of the honors program and the administration of the honors program to increase the number of African American participants. To continue increasing the number of African American women begins with the recruitment and admissions process for the institution and for honors program. Admissions representatives can assist in increasing the number of African American students by understanding the importance of speaking about the experiences that African American women have on their campus. This will assist in going beyond the aesthetics of a campus to supporting African American women in understanding that they belong at that campus. Honors programs can partner with their admissions departments to identify incoming students that may be eligible for the program. With the participants indicating that they knew they were not the only African American women who were eligible for the program, the honors program can develop a referral program that may enable upper-class students to enter the honors program.

Even though higher education is and was designed to educate students, students are often left out of the conversation, especially in regards to how to best serve them

(Agenda, 2012). Higher education administrations must be more inclusive to ensure students have a seat at the table for important college-wide initiatives. When major programmatic change occurs within institutions without student input, these changes may lack the stability they need for their longevity (Agenda, 2012).

College students who receive significant financial support may be viewed as underserving or as taking resources away from other deserving students (Fries-Britt, 1998). All of the students in this study received some form of financial support, even if they were not first-generation students. Many of them earned full scholarships to OSSU and were very aware of their financial need and their financial goal of not incurring debt while in college. Ensuring adequate funding for students to be able to focus on their education and not be all consumed with paying bills and going into debt must continue to be at the forefront of conversations within higher education. If programs like honors will continue to be asked to support building the intellectual capital of America, ensuring a diverse body of thought will continue to be a necessity. Without adequate financial support, many of these honors program participants may not have been able to attend OSSU, let alone participate in the honors program.

The above suggestions are all constructed to fortify the walk of African American female students as they seek a college education. They also contribute to a strengthening of the campus culture for the representation of African American women to thrive and develop strong feelings of belongingness on campus. Regarding these suggestions, specific recommendations are as follows:

1. Develop a college path that is shared with students from all walks of life and at all ages and grades. As students progress through secondary education and they see the same information regarding college, they will retain the information and be able to utilize it.
2. Assist students in identifying strong organizational skills for them to understand what they need to do to prepare for a college education and earn their degree.
3. Ensure admissions representatives articulate beyond the benefit of the campus to assisting African American women in understanding they will feel that they belong on the campus.
4. Strengthen further the partnerships between honors programs and recruitment and admissions and take that a step farther by developing a referral program with current African American female honors participants.

### **The Experience of Providing a Space of Understanding**

The lens of these African American women showed that although they may be living within the bubble of college, they still felt the long legacy of America's racist history. As described by the participants, they often felt they were seen because of the color of their skin and not for who they were as scholars. As the literature has discussed, African American women cannot unhook their identities because their gender and race are connected (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Settles, 2006). One may see that the participants perhaps wished they are seen more (immediately) for their scholarly work and not the color of their skin. However, the participants realized that they do stand out because of their race and gender. Because the participants were unable to (easily) hide



their race and gender, they provide space (whether deserved or not) to their fellow students to understand what they already know—they are more than qualified to sit in the seat in which they occupy. Providing this luxury for their fellow students is not something these African American women have to do for their survival. It is something that has become necessary for them to navigate the very white spaces of their PWI.

This space of understanding further assists with these African American women being seen as individuals and intellectuals. Although their fellow students may (inadvertently) not see them, the space the participants give allows them to stand their ground and become visible. They in turn are moving toward being visible and not super-invisible (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007). Understanding the thoughts of African American women during these spatial moments may be key in the continued inclusivity work within higher education. The resiliency and agency drawn upon in these situations deserves attention because these women assert their visibility, particularly because no other population of individuals must provide the space for their counterparts the way African American women are asked to do so (Seo & Hinton, 2009). This example utilizes a Black/white dichotomy as referenced; however this may happen with interactions between African American women and African American men, Asian women, Latinos, and so on (Seo & Hinton, 2009). It is not an exclusive Black/white issue.

Understanding what happens in the short space of time when an African American woman may feel marginalized is another critical point in ensuring that not only a campus is prepared for African American women but also the presence of these women is sustainable. This means that for the entirety of their college tenure, African American

women will experience consistent and steady support. The specific recommendations to accomplish this include,

1. Research what the thoughts and intentions that African American women have as they give space to their colleagues. What are they thinking? What feelings arise for them? What actions do they wish they could take?
2. To mitigate the necessity of allowing a space of understanding, college campuses must work harder to create an environment where social justice and equity are prevalent and expected in all aspects. This comes from ongoing and progressive trainings for all students, faculty, and staff. This will allow for growth and transition to occur while the culture of the institution shifts.

#### **WWHPD (What Would Honors Programs Do?)**

Honors programs continue to be uniquely situated within American higher education, especially as it relates to African American women high achievers. As previously stated, African American women are earning more college degrees and at a higher rate than other racial or ethnic groups, which includes African American men (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). However, there is more research conducted on behalf of African American men than on behalf of African American women. Although the number of African American female honors program participants remains small, it does not have to remain that way. Perhaps the way for African American women to be recognized for their accomplishments is through collegiate honors programs at PWIs. There continues to be doubt about the ability of African American women, however honors programs are well

respected throughout American higher education (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010; Coleman, Kotinek & Oda2017).

Honors programs are in a position to make a significant contribution to shifting the incorrect beliefs about African American scholars. Significant work within honors programs has occurred to address the need for inclusivity in honors programs, despite the NCHC not including a definition of diversity, equity, and inclusion in its *Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program* (NCHC, 2019). Honors program leaders have come together to broadly discuss the impact diversity and inclusivity have had on honors over the last two to three decades (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). These same leaders may continue to push the envelope to more fully and specifically support African American women through inclusive scholarly work.

One method to create inclusive environments may be to make the large PWI institution smaller. Reviewing the feedback of the participants, one can see that they appreciate being in smaller communities, yet these eight participants do not know one another. Or, they do not know they are all in this program together. Regardless, the honors program must work to connect these individuals, so they continue to have a sense of place beyond their classes, their residence hall, and even the honors program. Black women need one another as support academically and socially. As Mandisa indicated, she may not check a box indicating that she is African American; however, she wants more interaction with Black women.

These interactions need to be organic and not forced. Perhaps it can be student driven and program supported. The program may be able to provide space and a small

budget and may ask an African American female student who has been a part of the program to reach out to the other Black female participants. It does not have to be formal; it simply needs to happen. The significance of the interaction occurring through honors is that this provides a salient identity for many of the participants. They identify with being part of the honors program. Part of their identity is directly tied to working hard and striving for every opportunity their undergraduate education may be able to afford them. Just as there is a need for a Black student union and MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) organizations on college campuses, African American women need and deserve their own space. Perhaps that space can be found within honors programs. Their intersectionality alone must be recognized for its uniqueness and the needs of these individuals, and honors programs have the flexibility to address the needs of African American women. As stated, honors program faculty and staff are able to construct their programs to fit the needs of their students. For example, honors faculty can infuse more literature and research conducted by and for African American women. They can continue to be the leaders in connecting disciplines that may not ordinarily be connected, such as neuroscience and womanism.

There may also be a need to understand the different experiences students have between the different honors experiences. For example, how is the experience different between honors colleges, university-wide honors programs and departmental honors. The understanding of the different experiences students have may further strengthen the need to expand honors throughout a college campus or may lead honors programs to focus more on one area of honors than another, for example expanding university-wide honors

versus departmental honors. This may provide more students the opportunity to benefit from participating in honors which may encompass more African American women (Hill Collins, 2000).

For nearly 100 years, honors programs have pushed students to excel within higher education as they prepare to enter various career fields. As honors programs contemplate how to increase and retain the number of students of color within their programs, some of the literature has referenced the elitist language of honors programs (Badenhausen, 2018). There have been suggestions to change the language surrounding honors programs so that students of color can understand what the programs are. The assumption that it is the language that holds students back from participating in honors programs is shallow (Badenhausen, 2018). Students of color may know if they are welcome in a program, and this is not likely to be because they do not understand the language that is spoken around them (Davis, 2018). Additionally, students of color seek to be a part of communities of excellence at their institutions, and instead of placing most of the burden to find out about those communities upon the students, the responsibility of sharing information needs to reside with the institution, with input from its students. The narratives provided an understanding of the experiences of African American women at one honors program. From these narratives OSSUs honors program and others like it may begin to see how these individuals need to be supported to be successful within honors. The narratives serve as a reminder to higher education professionals that as equity work is continued that providing support structures for students is very individual even within communities that may carry the same moniker, i.e., African American woman.

Even though this research did not compare individuals to individuals, there are comparisons that can be made from this research. For example, honors programs and colleges and universities may utilize different definitions of success than the participants. This may also be a result of American higher education not being constructed for students other than White men. Through further understanding of what success may mean to African American collegiate honors participants, honors programs may continue to strengthen their programs to not only support African American women but to attract them as well.

Honors programs have a significant amount of power within higher education because of their history and the work students accomplish because of their support.

Suggestions for honors programs include:

1. Maximize their reputation within American higher education to shift the focus to African American women and their unique needs within American higher education.
2. Resist the temptation to believe that the high standards may be compromised as the faces of honors program students begin to resemble the larger student body.
3. Closely examine the culture of language that surrounds the program. That is not to say that the program needs to change its language; rather, the program needs to understand how students (in particular African American women) perceive the honors program environment.

## **Thoughts on Future Research**

### **Shifting the Lens**

There are certainly more than eight African American female participants in collegiate honors programs in the United States. However, the eight participants in this study opened a window to provide a much-needed view of the lived experiences of (solely) African American women in collegiate honors programs at a PWI. Regardless of the number of participants, this study is unique in that the participants are not compared to men or their other female colleagues: This study was solely for and about them (Hill Collins, 2000). Often African American women are portrayed through a deficit lens concerning education because there are obstacles they may have issues difficulty navigating (Settles, 2006). Through this negative lens, they come from underfunded inner-city schools, their college entrance test scores are below average, they come from low socioeconomic areas, they may not have goals to earn a college degree, and they may not be college ready (Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006). This is a short list of obstacles that many observe African American women as encountering as they seek to earn a college degree. This list can be compounded when they are compared to others, such as Asian women, White women, and African American men. When they are compared, their story is not told as clearly as it deserves to be. This study is building on the increasing research for and about Black women, because not studying solely Black women is becoming a social justice issue (Davis, 2018; Hill Collins, 2000); Settles, 2006). Ensuring that these individuals become seen and do not remain invisible (especially with their

small numbers within honors programs) will be critical for programs to recruit and retain new talented students (Davis, 2018).

African American women are continuing to achieve within and gain access to professions that were reserved mostly for men (Hill Collins, 2000). Whereas these achievements are impressive, many more African American women may have the potential for these same types of successes. Just as the focus has been on the struggles of African American women, the attention can shift towards the success that these individuals have had. It is important to note that careful attention needs to be paid to telling the story of success through an asset lens. One way for America to continue to come to terms with its racist history is to not only acknowledge what has happened to its people but also understand that the power of the acknowledgement will assist in shifting the culture (Allen et al., 1991; Hill Collins, 2000; Settles, 2006; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Groups may be able to move forward and not blame and as a result will be able to develop the future. Imagine the power that could come from acknowledgement of past errors and then ensuring success.

### **Black Feminist Thought**

Through BFT, Hill Collins (1991, 2000, 2016) has assisted in gathering and focusing the voices of a population of individuals that have largely been ignored in America—Black woman. Hill Collins's deep dive into the rich history of these people has resulted in this history being brought to the forefront and utilized to share the experiences of Black women in America. By bringing their perspective to the forefront, other researchers have sought to continue to expand upon Hill Collins's work and further share



the stories of African American women in America. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is showing that times are changing for students of color and especially for African American women within education. For example, African American women are beginning to be the focus of research instead of being grouped with other genders or races (Hill Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984; Settles, 2006). BFT has been a monumental conduit for supporting the research of, for, and about African American women.

This new century is showing us that Black women are changing. They identify as African American/Black, but they may not wish to check a box. Future BFT research may include how Black women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century define their racial and gendered identity, especially within PWIs. The confidence that the participants possess can be seen through this research, and further research needs to be conducted to more completely understand how their confidence is manifested. By continuing to narrow the focus and understand the experiences of African American women, higher education institutions will be able to not only better prepare for these students but also see them to completion of their degree. This is especially true for African American women seeking to enter honors programs and push their learning further. BFT can continue to shift its focus to see what educational privilege looks like from the perspective of African American women.

Another aspect of BFT may be examining the campus norms for African American women. Understanding those norms may also assist in changing toxic campus cultures that may be unknown by institutional leadership. This research indicates that there are racist micro-aggressions occurring at OSSU that may go unnoticed because no

one is (particularly) looking for them or asking if they occur. Not being handed a flyer may seem small, however it speaks to the inclusivity of the entire campus culture. If African American women do not feel included, then the campus must take steps to understand its gaps in inclusivity. This is directly focused on the campus climate, which is linked to retention and the campus image within its community. Racial micro-aggressions aside, these participants' shared experiences of success provide a different view of African American students attending a PWI. As suppression by the dominant class modifies to allow these different perspectives to be more widely shared, campus cultures will change (Hill Collins, 1989).

To expand on the differences among African American women, it is time to research the women who identify as African American but whose parents (or grandparents) are immigrants from another country. There is a new dynamic of African American women emerging, and their story also needs to be told. Within the group of African American women who are born in this country, there are a significant number of differences, as can be seen from this study. There has been oppression for African American women, whether they have a strong influence from immediate family members from Africa or from those who grew up in Africa and have sought to understand their African roots. Although colonialism has impacted these two types of African American women differently, the oppression links these groups of women who are often identified as one group. This further illuminates the need to understand just how non-homogenous a group African American women are.

As has been discussed, little research has been done solely on African American women, and even less has been conducted on African American women who identify as an immigrant. There is a different story that can be told of what the American dream is for them and their families and why they chose to come to America. It is also important to understand if they are finding satisfaction in their American experience. They may be able to share a very different story because they grew up learning about the marches and the American Civil Rights Movement and powerful women like Shirley Chisholm and Fannie Lou Hamer versus the generations of African Americans who can still recall marching in Selma and the deaths of the four little girls at 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. They all have very different perspectives on civil rights, however these experiences are connected.

The participants self-identified as being an African American woman yet, they did not discuss their gender as much as they did their race. This may also be a reference to how America has racialized the experience of the African American woman to place race before gender. As a reminder, many of the participants were in the beginning stages of their college career and may not yet have a full understanding of what it means to be a woman to them. In continuing this study, it may be interesting to continue to understand how African American women in the beginning of their college career understand their intersectionality of race and gender and then re-interview these same individuals at the end of their college career. The research may show how these individuals continue to develop their identity and how they see the impact of the intersection of being a Black woman.

Utilizing BFT for this study provided a clear path to sharing the participants' stories of their path to a collegiate honors program and their experiences. Preparing to write my dissertation, I was struck by how few theories there were that solely focused on African American women (Hill Collins, 2000; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). This was especially concerning after taking many classes through my doctorate program and being exposed to many higher education theories. These theories (regardless if they were developed by people of color) did not focus on African American women (Patton, 2009). In searching for the theoretical framework for this dissertation, the only one that I found that would support my research was BFT. Upon deciding to use BFT, I questioned why it continued to be a "thought" and had not become a "theory." Considering how many theories there are concerning college students, their identity, how they understand the college processes, how they learn, and so on, maybe the theories that did not include African American women can be updated by applying their tenets to this particular group.

Hill Collins (2000) clearly articulated that she developed BFT through womanist, Marxist, and even through Afrocentric ideology so that it was accessible to all individuals, not an elite few. She has also continued to indicate that she did not name Black feminist thought as Black feminist theory because she did not want the label of theory to distract from its meaning—to be for and about African American women (Hill Collins, 2000). Almost 20 years have passed since her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, has been written. BFT continues to be one of the few methods with which African American women can share their stories and be heard within an academic setting (Howard-Hamilton et al., 2011).

To further ensure that BFT continues to be a conduit for sharing these individuals' experiences, it can be updated and strengthened by continuing to build on understanding the complex lives of African American women. The tenets remain relevant, however including tenets on intimacy and leadership will assist in bringing current BFT. The continued blurring of the definition of gender will have an impact on how Black women continue to identify themselves (hooks, 1984; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Even though the lines of gender may be blurred, the experiences of Black women will continue to be impactful. Just as the participants in this study found they became comfortable with being the only within the college setting, the leadership style of African American women and connecting that to BFT also needs to be expanded upon. College provides a limited time for African American women to not only experience difficult spaces but also decide how they choose to present themselves in those spaces. The time period after college, when these individuals find themselves in significant leadership roles where the time is not as limited as in college, deserves attention and to be connected through BFT.

### **Participant Update**

Since gathering data for this study, the participants have continued to achieve both personally and professionally. In speaking with the participants as I gathered their updated information, I have wondered how their answers to my questions may be different now than when we met one another over two years ago. During that time many of them were completing their first or second year of college and the answers to my questions may be different now with their continued educational experience. Continuing to chart success over a period of time will assist in allowing both students and educators

to better understand how to support African American female college students. This process may also lend itself to the ongoing equity work occurring within American higher education institutions to show how support and services need to be modified to support students (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). With that, here is a quick snapshot of where the participants are now:

**Eshe**

- 2019 graduate in Biology & Psychology, and is currently taking a gap year before attending medical school

**Amara**

- 2015 graduate in Industrial Engineering, and is currently a Project Manager with Social Media giant

**Amani**

- 2017 graduate in Biology, currently is a 2<sup>nd</sup> year Pharmaceutical Graduate Student

**Issa**

- 2019 graduate in Accounting and is currently interviewing at accounting firms and will be seeking her CPA licensure.

**Kali**

- 2020 graduate in Political Science and will also receive her masters Public Administration and she is currently a political intern with a presidential candidate.

**Fayola**

- 2019 graduate in Petroleum Engineering and will be starting a full-time position with a multi-billion dollar oil company.

**Mandisa**

- 2019 graduate in Math/Science Education and also received her master's in Curriculum & Instruction and she is currently studying abroad in Costa Rica.

**Ramla**

- 2020 graduate in Chemical Engineering and she is currently a chemical engineering intern with a multi-billion dollar chemical company.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of African American women in a collegiate honors program. Utilizing BFT to tell these stories, partnered with hermeneutics, provided a powerful platform for the stories of Eshe, Amare, Ramla, Issa, Kali, Fayola, Mandisa, and Amani. Their stories provided valuable information for higher education institutions seeking to retain students such as these academically talented individuals. For the last few decades, access to higher education for students of color has been an intense subject and debate for American higher education. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although some may still consider it to be a concern, access is not the concern that retention and completion have become. Without the structures for and understanding of the needs of students like the Infinite Eight,

American higher education will continue do a disservice to students who are more than capable of matriculating at their institutions.

The truth is, Black women have always spoken up for themselves, but their voices and their lives were muted. Even if they were muted inadvertently through being studied with other women or Black men, their voices were not at the forefront. It is time for that to change. No longer are we—African American women—those that are not welcome to walk through the front but are relegated to walk through the back to do the work others chose not to do. We are no longer outsiders who have found ourselves inside. We are building the doorways in which others walk, but few know who built those doors. We know who built those doors, and it is up to us to share these stories.

### **My Sankofa: A Researcher's Takeaway and Looking Back**

Sankofa is another Adinkra symbol that means we must learn from the past to make the future stronger. For many years, I have had the privilege to tell individuals that I am an educator. I love education and what it does for individuals and our communities. In writing this dissertation, I received a whole new education, and I am better for it. To sit at the feet of these women and for them to trust me with their stories is an incredibly humbling experience. The thought that their voices and their stories may not have been heard simply because they are African American and women is a sobering thought. Yes, there are educational inequities across all spectrums of American higher education. Regardless of those inequities, attention must be given to African American women. The attention needs to focus on how their identities continue to evolve, which helps with an



understanding of the needs of African American female students in American higher education.

As an African American woman, and as the researcher for this study, I found myself thinking that, of course, Black women need and deserve to be highlighted in all of their endeavors. Combing through article after article, I became more and more discouraged that I would not find the right theory or method to share the Infinite Eight's stories. BFT was the only way I felt I could adequately tell their story from Black woman to Black woman. Yes, there are other methods I could have utilized to tell their stories; however the stories perhaps would have been different--not incorrect, just different. Reflecting on the participants' experiences and then comparing them to my own, I realized that I am often alone in white spaces, and it is because of my maternal influences that I have been able to successfully navigate those spaces. At this point in my career (more than 20+ years in), I no longer have the patience to sit and wonder if when I say something I will be heard. I ensure that I am heard, whether it is a popular statement or not. If I believe it is important to be stated, I will state it. Additionally, it is because of this study that I realize that my voice in white spaces is even more powerful. As I make space for my voice, I am, in essence, making space for theirs.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program**

#### Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program (NCHC, 2012)

Although no single or definitive honors program model can or should be superimposed on all types of institutions, the National Collegiate Honors Council has identified a number of best practices that are common to successful and fully developed honors programs.

1. The honors program offers carefully designed educational experiences that meet the needs and abilities of the undergraduate students it serves. A clearly articulated set of admission criteria (e.g., GPA, SAT score, a written essay, satisfactory progress, etc.) identifies the targeted student population served by the honors program. The program clearly specifies the requirements needed for retention and satisfactory completion.
2. The program has a clear mandate from the institution's administration in the form of a mission statement or charter document that includes the objectives and responsibilities of honors and defines the place of honors in the administrative and academic structure of the institution. The statement ensures the permanence and stability of honors by guaranteeing that adequate infrastructure resources, including an appropriate budget as well as appropriate faculty, staff, and administrative support when necessary, are allocated to honors so that the program avoids dependence on the good will and energy of particular faculty members or administrators for survival. In other words, the program is fully institutionalized (like comparable units on campus) so that it can build a lasting tradition of excellence.
3. The honors director reports to the chief academic officer of the institution.
4. The honors curriculum, established in harmony with the mission statement, meets the needs of the students in the program and features special courses, seminars, colloquia, experiential learning opportunities, undergraduate research opportunities, or other independent-study options.
5. The program requirements constitute a substantial portion of the participants' undergraduate work, typically 20% to 25% of the total course work and certainly no less than 15%.

6. The curriculum of the program is designed so that honors requirements can, when appropriate, also satisfy general education requirements, major or disciplinary requirements, and preprofessional or professional training requirements.
7. The program provides a locus of visible and highly reputed standards and models of excellence for students and faculty across the campus.
8. The criteria for selection of honors faculty include exceptional teaching skills, the ability to provide intellectual leadership and mentoring for able students, and support for the mission of honors education.
9. The program is located in suitable, preferably prominent, quarters on campus that provide both access for the students and a focal point for honors activity. Those accommodations include space for honors administrative, faculty, and support staff functions as appropriate. They may include space for an honors lounge, library, reading rooms, and computer facilities. If the honors program has a significant residential component, the honors housing and residential life functions are designed to meet the academic and social needs of honors students.
10. The program has a standing committee or council of faculty members that works with the director or other administrative officer and is involved in honors curriculum, governance, policy, development, and evaluation deliberations. The composition of that group represents the colleges and/or departments served by the program and also elicits support for the program from across the campus.
11. Honors students are assured a voice in the governance and direction of the honors program. This can be achieved through a student committee that conducts its business with as much autonomy as possible but works in collaboration with the administration and faculty to maintain excellence in the program. Honors students are included in governance, serving on the advisory/policy committee as well as constituting the group that governs the student association.
12. Honors students receive honors-related academic advising from qualified faculty and/or staff.
13. The program serves as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. When proven successful, such efforts in curriculum and pedagogical development can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus.
14. The program engages in continuous assessment and evaluation and is open to the need for change in order to maintain its distinctive position of offering exceptional and enhanced educational opportunities to honors students.
15. The program emphasizes active learning and participatory education by offering opportunities for students to participate in regional and national conferences, Honors Semesters, international programs, community service, internships, undergraduate research, and other types of experiential education.

16. When appropriate, two-year and four-year programs have articulation agreements by which honors graduates from two-year programs who meet previously agreed-upon requirements are accepted into four-year honors programs.
17. The program provides priority enrollment for active honors students in recognition of scheduling difficulties caused by the need to satisfy both honors and major program(s) requirements.

Approved by the NCHC Executive Committee on March 4, 1994; amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on November 23, 2007; further amended by the NCHC Board of Directors on February 19, 2010 (NCHC, 2012).

## **Appendix B: Sixteen Features of a Full Honors Program**

The Sixteen Major Features of a Full Honors Program (Cohen, 1966, pp. 46-49)

1. Identify and select students of higher ability as early as possible. This involves far closer cooperation than has hitherto been the case with high schools and preparatory schools. It also involves making full use of the new experience that has accumulated on the proper uses of predictive techniques, past records, entrance tests and interviews, as well as of studies of aptitude, motivation, readiness, and achievement.
2. Start programs for these students immediately upon admission to the college or university, and admit other superior students into these programs whenever they are later identified by their teachers.
3. Make such programs continuous and cumulative through all four years, with honors counseling especially organized and equally continuous.
4. Formulate such programs so that they will relate effectively both to all the college work for the degree and to the area of concentration, departmental specialization, or preprofessional or professional training.
5. Make the programs varied and flexible by establishing special courses, ability sections, honors seminars, colloquia, and independent study, all with course credit. Advanced placement and acceleration will serve in a contributory role.
6. Make the honors program increasingly visible throughout the institution so that it will provide standards and models of excellence for all students and faculty, and contribute to the substitution of an “honors outlook” for the “grade outlook.” For the latter purpose, gradelessness in some honors offerings—i.e., “pass-fail” approach---s a frequent advantage.
7. Employ methods and materials appropriate to superior students. Experience has shown that this involves:
  - a. Bringing the abler students together in small groups or classes of from five to twenty
  - b. Using primary sources and original documents rather than textbooks where possible
  - c. Eliminating lecturing and predigesting by the faculty of content to be covered; approaching the subject matter to be covered selectively; discouraging passive note-taking; encouraging student adventure with ideas in open discussion—the colloquium method with appropriate modification of this method in science and professional schools

- d. Supplementing the above with increased independent study, research and summer projects, honors study abroad, and imaginatively conceived summer institutes
  - e. Providing for continuous counseling in the light of the individual student's development by teaching personnel rather than by full-time nonteaching counselors; but the professional counseling staff should include specialists in honors
  - f. Differentiating between the needs of men and women in counseling in the light of the steeper erosion of talents after graduation among the latter
  - g. Embodying in the program the required differentia between the creative and the formally cognitive approach
  - h. Giving terminal examinations to test the honors results
8. Select faculty qualified to give the best intellectual leadership to able students and fully identified with the aims of the program.
  9. Set aside, where possible, any requirements that restrict a good student's progress, thus increasing his freedom among the alternative facets of the honors and regular curriculum.
  10. Build in devices of evaluation to test both the means used and the ends sought by an honors program.
  11. Establish a committee of honors students to serve as a liaison with the honors committee or council. Keep them fully informed on the program and elicit their cooperation in evaluation and development.
  12. Use good students wherever feasible as apprentices in teaching and as assistants to the best men on the faculty. Even freshmen can sometimes serve in this capacity. There is increasing use both of available research institutes and laboratories in the area for a semester for a summer. Foundation funds in support of such undergraduate research and independent study projects are increasingly available.
  13. Employ honors students for counseling, orientation, and other appropriate honors purposes within the general student body.
  14. Establish, where possible, an honors center with honors library, lounge, reading rooms and other appropriate décor.
  15. Work toward closer liaison between the undergraduate honors program and the graduate school.
  16. Ensure that such programs will be permanent features of the curriculum and not dependent on temporary or spasmodic dedication of particular faculty members or administrators—in other words, institutionalize such programs, budget for them, and build thereby a tradition of excellence.

## Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear (insert title listed below according to audience)

My name is Janell Lindsey, and I'm a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at the University of Denver.

I am conducting a study to learn more about African American female students who are enrolled in a collegiate honors program or college. By learning more about the lived experiences of African American female students who are enrolled in honors programs, I am seeking to describe their lives to encourage developing more best practices for higher education institutions and honors programs to ensure these students are supported and that the institutions seek more high-achieving African American women to be a part of the program. This study is being conducted as part of the requirements for my doctoral program, and is supervised by Dr. Judy Marquez Kiyama, Associate Professor of Higher Education.

If you meet the eligibility requirements below, please consider being part of this study.

1. You identify as African American or Black.
2. Have been identified as gifted or high-achieving
3. You are currently enrolled in an honors program or college in the United States
4. You identify as female
5. You are classified as an undergraduate student and do not hold a bachelor's degree or other advanced degree

The study will involve three 60-90 minute interviews. The first interview will focus on your life history and the factors that influenced your decision to become a part of an honors program; the second, your experiences as a part of the honors program; and the third, the significance of the honors program for you. If you meet the eligibility requirements listed above, learning more about your own experiences with honors programs will be valuable for this study. If you do not meet the eligibility requirements but know someone else who might, please consider forwarding this email.

I hope that you will consider sharing your knowledge and expertise with me. If you are interested in participating in this study, please go to (*link to Qualtrics survey*) to complete a short questionnaire to determine whether you meet the eligibility requirements for this



study. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [janell.linsey@du.edu](mailto:janell.linsey@du.edu) or 303-525-6585.

Kind regards,

Janell Lindsey  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Higher Education Program, Diversity and Higher Learning Concentration  
Morgridge College of Education  
University of Denver  
[janell.linsey@du.edu](mailto:janell.linsey@du.edu)

## **Appendix D: Participant Thank You Email**

Dear [Participant],

Congratulations on being selected to participate in our study, "The Outsider Within: African American Women and Collegiate Honors Programs". I am excited to not only hear your story but to share it for the future African American women and little girls who will follow in your footsteps. With the end of the MLK week of celebration and inauguration of the 45th President, your story matters now more than ever!

I will be visiting OSSU January 26 - January 29 conducting interviews. I have a variety of times available for you to sign up for our initial interview. Please sign up for a slot through the Doodle Poll. Once I receive your choice, I will send you a confirmation email with the room location where we will be meeting. If you have any questions, please email or text me. I look forward to seeing you next week.

I honor you and your willingness to share your story,  
Janell Lindsey  
Ph.D., Candidate  
University of Denver, Morgridge College of Education  
[janell.lindsey@du.edu](mailto:janell.lindsey@du.edu)

## **Appendix E: Informed Consent**

Research Project title: A Hermeneutical Study of African American Women in Collegiate Honors Programs

You are invited to participate in a study that will examine the lived experiences of African American women in collegiate honors programs. This study is being conducted by Janell Lindsey to fulfill the requirements for a doctoral degree. Janell Lindsey can be reached at 303-525-6585 or [janell.lindsey@du.edu](mailto:janell.lindsey@du.edu). This project is supervised by Dr. Judy Marquez Kiyama, Associate Professor of Higher Education, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208, ([judy.kiyama@du.edu](mailto:judy.kiyama@du.edu), 303-871-3753).

Participation in this study will involve completing a short questionnaire to establish eligibility for the study. If selected for this study, you will participate in three 60-90 minute interviews. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. Benefits include the opportunity to share and reflect on your unique experiences with being a part of a collegiate honors program. The findings of this study have the potential to better inform how higher education institutions support high-achieving students of color and inform honors programs of their supportive culture.

The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue the interviews at any time. We respect your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Given the relatively small number of students who will meet the criteria for this study, one potential risk is of participation in this study is breach of confidentiality. The steps that will be taken to maintain the confidentiality of your responses include the following: Your responses will be identified by pseudonym and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. All interview recordings and transcriptions will be encrypted. A pseudonym will also be used for the institution. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interviews, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may email du-irb@du.edu, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs or call 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called A Hermeneutical Study of African American Women in Collegiate Honors Programs.

I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_ (initials) I understand that in order to participate in this study, I agree that interviews will be audiotaped.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:

## Appendix F: Participant Eligibility Questionnaire

*The questionnaire below will be administered through Qualtrics. The participant invitation email will include a link to this survey.*

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study A Hermeneutical Study of African American Women in Collegiate Honors Programs. Please take a few minutes to complete this questionnaire, which will determine your eligibility for this study. A few additional questions are included so that a diverse group of participants. By completing this questionnaire, you agree to be considered for participation in this study, although you may withdraw your consent at any time.

Only the researcher will have access to your identifying information. You will be notified via email if you are selected for the study. If you are not selected for the study, your identifying information will be destroyed.

If you have any questions about this study or your eligibility, please contact Janell Lindsey at [janell.lindsey@du.edu](mailto:janell.lindsey@du.edu). If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the process of completing this questionnaire, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or [du-irb@du.edu](mailto:du-irb@du.edu), Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-4820.

1. Please select the items below that best reflect your racial/ethnic identity (choose all that apply):

- African American
- Black
- White
- Hispanic/Latino(a)
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- Two or more races
- Other

2. If you selected other, please describe your racial/ethnic identity below.

3. Are you currently enrolled in an honors program or college or have you been a part of an honors program within the last five years?

- Yes
- No

4. Please indicate the name of your college or university.

5. What is your gender?

6. What is your year in school (e.g., freshman, junior, etc.)?

7. What is your major(s)?

8. What is your name?

First name

Last name

9. Please list your contact information:

Email address

Telephone number

## **Appendix G: Interview Guide (Interview 1)**

The first interview will focus on the participant's life history and the decision to become a part of an honors program. This will allow me to put the experience into context. The participant will be asked to select a pseudonym in this interview. While a list of questions has been developed to guide the discussion, some of the responses may emerge naturally through the conversation. I will also have the flexibility to explore new topics as presented by the participant.

1. Tell me about yourself. (prompts: where participant grew up, family background, previous educational experiences, previous international experiences).
2. How does your family influence your academic success? Your friends?
3. Describe your academic path to this institution.
4. How did you prepare academically to be a part of an honors program?
5. What is it like to be a student at [your institution] and what a typical day is like?
6. Describe your ultimate academic goals for your undergraduate education before and after you graduate.
7. Please describe the culture of your honors program.
8. Can you tell me about your best experience within the honors program?
9. Can you tell me about your worst experience with the honors program?
10. Describe your first semester being an honors student?
11. Describe a typical day for you as an honors student.
12. As an honor's program participant, what is the classroom experience like at [your institution]?
13. How do you believe is your honors program experience shaping your undergraduate experience?
14. Has participating in the honors program changed your goals for your undergraduate education? If so, in what ways?
15. Is being a part of an honors program what you expected? Why or why not?
16. What else would you like to share with me about your honors program experience?

## **Appendix H: Interview Guide (Interview 2)**

The second interview will focus on the details of the participant's lived experience by being a part of the program. Again, while questions have been developed as a guideline, I will have the ability to follow new themes that emerge from the conversation.

1. Describe your cultural heritage.
2. What are the aspects of your identity that are most important to you at [your institution]?
3. Please describe the racial climate of your campus.
4. What roles do you believe you play in regards to your family, friends, education and within the honors program?
5. What is your interaction like with students who are not part of the honors program?
6. How did the process of being admitted and then welcomed into the honors program make you feel?
7. Tell me about a time when your race affected your honors program experience.
8. Within the context of the honors program, what are the most salient aspects of your identity that are the most important to you?
9. What does it mean to be an African American gifted or high-achieving female in an honors program?
10. How, if at all, does race matter in your honors program?
11. Is there anything else you think I should know about your honors program experience?



### **Appendix I: Interview Guide (Interview 3)**

The final interview will be focused on learning the significance of the honors program experience for the participant. It will also provide an opportunity to build upon the previous interviews and clarify data, so additional questions may be asked based on the prior interviews. Questions may also be asked related to emerging themes across participants.

1. What does being a part of an honors program mean to you?
2. What is the significance of your honors program experience for your home life? (prompts: personal, relationships with friends/family, academics, future career).
3. Is there anything else you think I should know about your honors program experience?

**Appendix J: Sing a Black Girl's Song from for Colored Girls Who Have Considered  
Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf**

“somebody/ anybody  
sing a black girl's song  
bring her out  
to know herself  
to know you  
but sing her rhythms  
carin/ struggle/ hard times  
sing her song of life  
she's been dead so long  
closed in silence so long  
she doesn't know the sound  
of her own voice  
her infinite beauty  
she's half-notes scattered  
without rhythm/ no tune  
sing her sighs  
sing the song of her possibilities  
sing a righteous gospel  
let her be born  
let her be born  
& handled warmly.” (Shange, 1977)

## Appendix K: Explanation and Image of Adinkra Symbols Used



**Name:** Sesa Wo Suban

**Meaning:** Symbol of Life Transformation

**Explanation:** This symbol combines two separate Adinkra symbols, the “Morning Star” which can mean a new start to the day, placed inside the wheel, representing rotation or independent movement (Kojo, 2017).



**Name:** Nea Onnim No Sua A, Ohu

**Meaning:** He who does not know can know from learning

**Explanation:** Symbol of knowledge, life-long education and continued quest for knowledge (Kojo, 2017)



**Name:** Akoben

**Meaning:** War horn

**Explanation:** Symbol of vigilance and wariness. Akoben is a horn used to sound a battle cry (Kojo, 2017).



**Name:** Aya

**Meaning:** Symbol of endurance and resourcefulness

**Explanation:** The fern is a hardy plant that can grow in difficult places. “An individual who wears this symbol suggests that s/he has endured many adversities and outlasted much difficulty” (Kojo, 2017).



**Name:** Sankofa

**Meaning:** Return and get it

**Explanation:** Symbol of importance of learning from the past (Kojo, 2017).