"CAN'T I BE BLACK AND SMART?": EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF BLACK HIGH-ACHIEVING COLLEGE WOMEN INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Temple University Graduate Board

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by
Adrianne Musu Davis
May 2017

Examining Committee Members:

Dr. James Earl Davis, Advisory Chair, Policy, Organization, & Leadership Studies
Dr. Will Jordan, Policy, Organizational & Leadership Studies
Dr. Catherine Schifter, Psychological Studies in Education
Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt, External Member, University of Maryland, Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education (CHSE)

ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of high-achieving talented undergraduate Black women inside and outside the classroom at a predominantly white urban university. Much of the higher education research studies how college affects students and how they develop psychosocially during their undergraduate experience. Using a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with undergraduate honors students, this study examines how Black women make meaning around their experiences in their social and academic lives at college. Intersectionality is used as a theoretical framework to analyze participants' experiences and to consider the salience of their intersecting racial, gender, and academic identities. Results indicated that inside the classroom participants were spotlighted and felt they were the representatives for their identity groups. In campus life, they were isolated and faced microaggressions from peers. Participants described their intersectional race x gender x academic identity as most salient in their experiences at college. Implications discuss strategies for creating more inclusive academic and social environments and future research for high-achieving undergraduate Black women.

This dissertation is dedicated to the brilliant Black women in honors whose questions sparked this study, and the gracious participants at Atlantic and Polytech for sharing their experiences. I also dedicate this to my father, Carl S Buckner: my high achievement came from your high expectations. I hope I made you proud.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my faculty mentors, "critical friends," colleagues, and family for their support during this experience. To the faculty who have helped guide me to this destination from my first semester - Dr. Will Jordan and Dr. Catherine Schifter - thank you for your pragmatism, encouragement, and candor as members of my dissertation committee. Thanks also to Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt for advising me on the dissertation, navigating the field, and life. I am especially thankful for my dissertation committee chair, Dr. James Earl Davis. Although we are not related, you took me under your wing and into your higher ed family. Thank you for dreaming about the future possibilities for this work. Your wisdom, laughter, encouragement, and generosity brought me through and I am so appreciative to have you as a mentor, colleague, and friend.

Thanks to the many iterations of my writing group of urban education doctors, but especially to Elena, Ross, and Martha. Thanks for coaxing me, cheering me on, and questioning me when I needed to grow - and allowing me to do the same for each of you. Thanks for your commitment to getting done together, Dr. Elena. Gratitude to Dr. Martha for your friendship, workspace, pancakes, editing, husband chicken, and the countless other things that helped me and my little family persist.

Team Honors has been a constant support over the years. There is nobody better or more brilliant than you. Thank you for never letting me be the smartest person in the room. Love to Ruth, Amanda, Brad, Seth, JVO, Jackie, and Zach. Thanks also to my students, past and present, who sparked the fire to do this work.

Buddhism teaches to express one's appreciation for her parents, especially our mother and father. I thank Carl and Regina for giving me life, and the village that helped

them raise me. I have sincere gratitude to my other mothers - Masako, Marilyn, Renee, and the Buddha mamas - who continue to support me in my daily life and practice. Thanks to my extended family as well: Hatsu, Qui, the Francises, my siblings, and all of the friends in Raven's village. Your unwavering confidence in my ability to achieve - despite my own doubts and the challenges outside of my control - gave me the courage to do more than I thought possible. Thank you for always expecting the best from me. You remind me where I came from and that you have my back every day in every way.

Last but not least, my sincerest gratitude to Jay - my partner in life, and our brilliant little Raven. Your patience and love have been my armor and my sword. Here's to all of the joy our future can hold. Finally Dr. Mama is here.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Asia was a junior communications student. Before she came to my office one quiet spring afternoon at the end of my first year as an academic advisor, we had never shared more than a smile in the hall or a passing hello in the Honors lounge. But on this day, Asia came to the office and requested to meet with me because she needed more than academic advising. She sat in the khaki armchair on the other side of my desk, introduced herself, and sank down a bit as she recounted a challenging situation she recently experienced in one of her honors classes. During general discussion, her classmate John made generalizations about Black students that are not in honors classes, commenting that they probably shouldn't be in college anyway. As the only woman of color in the classroom full of academically talented students, Asia felt under fire. Most of her friends were not honors students, especially her friends of color. She addressed his comments directly during class: she pointed out that John spent most of his time with other honors students who were from his same ethnic background and that he didn't know enough about all Black students at the university to make such a statement. After her retort, none of her classmates spoke up to support her assertions or say anything at all. Her instructor chose not to intervene or address either student's comments.

As Asia continued, I learned that this was not a one-time occurrence for her. Her racial majority peers and professors dismissed her perspectives in other classes as well, even when she cited the text or shared from personal experience, even in her honors classes. Their disregard for her insights made her feel angry, unsupported, and unheard.

Like most of her peers, Asia was admitted into honors because of her high standardized test scores and excellent GPA. She was bright, and by the measures that earned them all entry into that class, just as intelligent as her peers. She had the same right to learn and contribute in that classroom as everyone else. Why did she constantly feel pressure to prove that she was smart enough to be there? She felt I was the only person that would understand her situation. Hearing about Asia's experience compelled me to learn about the challenges Black honors women faced and to develop strategies to support their success. Asia's narrative addressed a number of issues that required additional attention in higher education research, including cultural insensitivity in the classroom, a lack of community among students of color, and the challenges of teaching and learning across color lines.

As an administrator at the university, I had a duty to support all of my students' success; but as a woman of color, I was personally committed to advocating for the needs of students like Asia and other academically talented undergraduate Black women. My experiences as a Black woman within my race and gender and academic identity groups were important to the way I viewed the world and gave me insight into the racial, gender, and intellectual oppression that students like Asia face in campus life (Collins, 1990, p. 33). I empathized with Asia and her peers and felt a sense of responsibility to help them individually and as a group to overcome the injustices they experienced in campus life. My position as an advisor in the Honors Program gave me access to the kinds of resources – human and social capital – which would allow me to make a difference in these women's lives. And with the support of the director of the Honors Program, I moved forward with an intervention I hoped would address some of their concerns.

I initiated the Honorables of Color Gatherings in fall 2012 to provide opportunities for Honors students of Black, Asian, Latino, Native American, Middle Eastern, and multiracial backgrounds to meet each other, share their experiences, and to help them create a sense of community as they supported one another through their college experience. Our bimonthly discussion meetings were relatively informal, starting with ice breakers and then the featured topic for the evening which included adjusting to college life, advice from upper classmen on academic success, demystifying the networking process, and inviting faculty of color to discuss their career paths and give encouragement. The first meeting had over forty participants, but attendance later dwindled, leaving a modest group of ten Black women as the most consistent participants. With this small group, the discussions consistently came back to the women's concerns about stereotypes associated with their race, gender, and intelligence, and the kinds of situations Asia shared with me when we first spoke. They shared their experiences of feeling people's stares during discussions about race in the classroom. They shared feeling unwelcome in the Honors lounge because they didn't see other students of color there. They were consistently labeled "the Black friend" without any consideration of their personality traits. They were accused of "talking White" and so sometimes chose not to talk at all, allowing themselves to be silenced by the threat of others' definition of their identities.

Although disheartening, the state of ethnic diversity at our urban predominantly White institution (PWI) validated their experiences in this environment. Black women made up less than 8 % of full-time undergraduates and only about 3 % of Honors students were part of that population in fall 2013. I had observed the scarcity of brown faces at

our events and in the Honors lounge myself, but until Asia came to me that afternoon and placed the issues on my desk, my concerns were intuition based on my own experiences at a PWI in college as a woman of color. Asia confirmed that my intuition was unfortunately correct; feeling unwelcome and marginalized in campus life were part of the reality for high-achieving Black women like Asia. By listening to the stories of high-achieving Black women, I had uncovered a part of their reality on our campus. In consideration of the multifaceted identities of these students and their social location at the intersection of overlapping systems of power, I understood the importance of not allowing their individual concerns to mask the "hierarchical power relations" in society that function in campus life inside and outside the classroom (Collins, 1998, p. 207 - 208).

"Can't I be Black *and* smart?" is a real question posed by one of the emerging leaders of the discussion group, the gravity of which sparked the specific focus of this dissertation study. The truth was that these women were capable of portraying intelligence, Blackness, and their gender simultaneously, but their lived reality inside and outside the classroom at college challenged their ability to confidently embody the place where these and other identities overlapped. Battling against racial, gender and intellectual stereotypes, these women were getting the disturbing message that it was not okay or possible to be Black and smart and any other way they might choose to define themselves. The present study examined the experiences of women like Asia inside and outside the classroom to reveal the way systems of power in society operated in college life through individual and institutional practices for high-achieving Black women.

Statement of the Problem

The experiences of high-achieving Black[1] women in college were understudied in higher education (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009; Sanon-Jules, 2010). There were volumes of research in the field on how college affected students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), the phases of their psychosocial and identity development (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), and what influences their success or attrition (Tinto, 1975, 2000) yet, high-achieving Black undergraduate women were not the focus of any influential study (Sanon-Jules, 2010). The voices of these women were absent from the literature on students' experiences in college leaving them invisible to campus support programs and institutional policy.

Black women were underrepresented at predominantly white universities (PWIs), especially among high-achievers (Coleman & Kotinek, 2010). As Black women, the intersection of their racial and gender identities played a role in how they made meaning around their experiences as college students – and more broadly in the world (Collins, 1990) - in a way that differed from their peers (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2010). Educators needed to learn more about this population to understand their unique needs and ensure that they provide appropriate support in order to foster their success as college students and beyond. This section outlines the common assumptions

[1] Black is used in this study to describe American individuals that identify as part of the African diaspora. I use the term interchangeably with African American for consistency with selected cited literature. I prefer the use of the term Black because it has a complex political significance in American history that is associated with slavery and other legal institutional forms of oppression committed against this population within a system maintained by a white majority and aimed at subordinating others based on perceived differences.

about academically talented Black women and addresses the implications of the lack of knowledge about this population for universities and society.

There were two misperceptions associated with high-achieving Black women: that their experiences were the same as students with similar intellectual and ethnic identities, and that their academic talent precluded them from needing resources to be successful. Both assumptions oversimplify the complex issues that result from these students' overlapping identities.

Racial identity mattered in the context of Black women's experiences as the issues facing Black and high-achieving students "come together in unique ways" (Griffin, 2006, p. 384). Some of the problems they faced echo the negative experiences of their non-honors Black peers at PWIs (Sedlacek, 1987) who also reported experiencing racist microaggressions (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, & Blysma, 2003) and stereotype threat inside and outside the classroom (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Spencer et al, 2001; Steele, 2010). Not all Black students were the same, however. The diversity within the group – in social interactions and academic ability particularly - made it important to examine those differences because not all Black students experience college in the same way, although as the research illustrated, there were definite consistencies in the hostility of the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2009; Griffin, 2006; Stewart, 2009).

In practice, all high-achievers - regardless of race, class, or gender - were assumed to face the same issues (or none at all). Despite the intellectual abilities they had in common, high-achievers were not a homogenous population. The ethnic differences within the population meant that academically talented Blacks encountered an assortment of challenges at PWIs that differ from their white peers (Strayhorn, 2009; Sanon-Jules,

2010). High-achieving Black students often felt racially isolated on campus and alienated from their majority and other minority peers. Inside and outside the classroom, they experienced subtle and overt forms of racism from peers and instructors. They feel the constant pressure to prove themselves academically (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009). Due to the limited research on this population, there were additional unique issues that had yet to be examined empirically.

Secondly, while it was clear that at-risk students need resources to succeed, the opposite was often assumed about talented students (Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007). There was not a lack of literature on the design or best practices of support programs that help underprepared students develop the tools for success inside and outside the classroom, even for minority students (Cuyjet & Associates, 2006; Gaither, 2005). The federal funding and development of TRIO, Upward Bound, and Educational Opportunity Programs were just a few examples of how institutions across the country support the needs of underprepared students. They provided specialized academic advising, cultural and social enrichment opportunities, and supplemental instruction to promote academic achievement. From remedial coursework to tutoring services, mentoring programs to comprehensive resource centers, universities actively addressed the needs of their underprepared and high-risk student population. In contrast, little research advocated for resources to support the needs of students at the other end of the spectrum (Sanon-Jules, 2010).

Many believed that because high-achievers were admitted with excellent credentials that they had fewer obstacles to collegiate academic success than their peers (Fries-Britt, 2002; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Freeman, 1999). But similar to the average

college student, high-achieving students also needed support that meets their needs. For example, strong academic performance in high school could create the feeling of pressure to perform at high levels in college (Freeman, 1999). And although high-achieving students may expect to do well on their own, good high school grades and high SAT scores were not fully indicative of a student's ability to adjust to the expectations of more rigorous academics or campus life outside the classroom. The transition to college may pose unique challenges for this group, some of which could make them at-risk in their own right.

Although many honors students were able to maintain high GPAs once they get to college, the challenges these students faced, particularly those facing Black women, were cause for concern: isolation, alienation, and negative interactions with faculty and peers were commonly associated with the experiences of students that leave college (Tinto, 1975; Strayhorn, 2009). Despite their academic talent, the literature suggested that these challenges could put students at risk if their sense of belonging and integration into the campus community did not improve (Strayhorn, 2009). In the interest of the students' futures and the retention efforts of the university, intentional interventions should be created to address high-achieving Black women's needs. Battling against racial and intellectual stereotypes, these young women were getting the disturbing message from their campuses, and society at large, that it was not okay or possible to be both Black and smart.

Gender also mattered in the context of these students' experiences. According to a review of the literature by West, Donovan, and Roemer (2010), "…several theorists have argued that Black women's position at the intersection of racial and gender

oppression creates a unique lived experience different from that of Black men" (p. 333). Studies on Black men echoed this perception. According to Cuyjet's (1997) research on Black male undergraduates, there were "discernable differences in perceptions and behaviors" (Cuyjet, 2006, p. 21). In his study on the academic behaviors of African American students, Cuyjet also found that Black men demonstrated less frequent note-taking in class, were more likely to use athletic facilities on campus, and were more concentrated in the population of student-athletes than their female counterparts.

In her 2006 study of African American undergraduate women, Winkle-Wagner (2009) found that experiencing culture shock and isolation on campus was common among her participants. There was the "dichotomous pressure to either speak on behalf of their ethnic group or remain silent in the classroom, which forced them to either be in the "spotlight" or "be invisible" (p. 23). They were stuck in a "dichotomy of racial performance - needing to modify their behavior to neither be "too white" nor "'too ghetto' (i.e., 'too Black') among their peers" (p. 23). Unfortunately, there was such a lack of research on high-achieving Black women that the specific differences from their peers of similar race or gender remained unclear. This dissertation study aimed to determine if the challenges Winkle-Wagner found apply to the high-achieving population.

Learning more about these students can promote a needed adjustment in the way universities approach supporting this and other minority populations. Much of the college student retention research placed the responsibility for students' integration into campus life and culture in the student's hands. For example, a number of retention scholars posited that students that do not integrate themselves into the campus community will not be successful (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 145); yet, other members of

the campus community – including peers and faculty – played a role in creating an environment that welcomed their unique identities and customs into campus life versus forcing assimilation. For high-achieving Black college students, integration could prove particularly challenging at PWIs. In order to be more inclusive, "retention policies, programs, and theories need to take the cultural background of students seriously and include discussions about cultural differences within the efforts to integrate students academically and socially" (p. 47). Colleges need to learn more about diverse populations to more readily support new groups of students on campus in ways that may differ from the way dominant groups or existing traditional methods may allow. For high-achieving students, the first place this may have an impact is in the communities and classes in which they participate as part of an honors college.

In order to help high-achieving Black women achieve at their highest potential, these misperceptions about their academic abilities and the obstacles that they face on campus needed to be addressed. As a matter of social justice, it was imperative to find ways to support the needs of this population in order to provide them the same opportunities for success as other collegians. At the time of the study, existing research did not provide an understanding of high-achieving Black undergraduate women's experiences in a manner that lent to the development of support initiatives. Institutions must learn how to meet their unique needs in order to promote this group's satisfaction and retention: their ability to do so would enable them to cultivate a capable group of Black professionals to take the lead in society (Fries-Britt, 2002). The present study aimed to contribute to the knowledge about these women in order to help institutions develop a solution.

There was limited research that focuses specifically on academically talented undergraduate Black women, particularly on their interactions with peers and various others inside and outside the classroom. This lack of knowledge in the higher education community made it challenging for me as an administrator to find ways to support their needs aside from encouraging them to connect with one another and spend more time together socially. Although by nature of their group membership they may have some similarities with their peers, these students' complex intersecting identities made it illogical for me to indiscriminately apply the strategies that may work for Black undergraduates or college women or high-achievers exclusively. Cuyjet (2006) makes a similar claim about interventions created for Black men, iterating the necessity for campus administrators to learn more about these particular kinds of students so that appropriate strategies are applied to promote their academic, personal, and social success and to enable other educational professionals to do the same with their own students. This study contributed to the knowledge about this population by learning more about the experiences of high-achieving Black female college students to inform university practice that can support their unique needs.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to understand how academically talented Black undergraduate women overcome the challenges in their college experience. Through this study I aimed to contribute to the limited empirical research on high-achieving students, and break the color and gender barriers in the literature by focusing on Black women. Two questions guided this study:

- What were the experiences of Black high-achieving college women inside and outside the classroom at a predominantly white university?
- Which aspects of their identity were most salient to the meaning high-achieving Black women make around their experiences in college?

A large part of undergraduate life was spent in the classroom, but how students chose to spend their time outside of it also played an important role in their college experience. Informal interactions with faculty and staff, involvement in student organizations, and other engagement within the campus or local communities all impact students' experiences (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). By considering these students holistically – their academic and social contexts in addition to their ethnic and gender identities – this study helped identify some of the unique needs of this population which will enable administrators to craft the specific services needed to support them (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

An examination of the experiences of high-achieving undergraduate Black women required attention to the complexity of the identities that made them subject to multiple oppressions (Collins, 2000). The ethnic and gender identities, among others, had sociopolitical and historical connotations within the larger context of American society for this population of Black women. As microcosms of U.S. society, college campuses were sites where the systems of power that subordinate these students as women, as Black, and by class, also manifested in the interactions that occur as part of campus life. The present study employed a framework that facilitated the analysis of

these aspects of identity and power constructs based on the lived experiences of the women at the center of this research.

Intersectionality is an instrumental “interpretive framework for thinking through how intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example, shape any group’s experience across specific social contexts” (Collins, 1998, p. 208). With its roots in the work of law scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989, 1991), and Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1991), this perspective historically focused “attention on the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics” (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). It was a tool used to advocate for the incorporation of "race-, class-, and gender-inclusive interpretations” of women of color’s lived experiences in sociological and legal discourse and research (Collins, 1998, p. 205). In its early applications, intersectionality was a "content-based specialization that emphasized the subjectivity of women who reside at the intersections of race-, gender-, class-, and sexual orientation-based marginalizations (and other categories of difference) (Hancock, 2007, p. 248). Over time, its reach expanded from Black feminist thought to critical race to educational and political science examinations of difference, taking on the attributes of a theoretical approach (Cho et al, 2013). Collins (1998) describes the framework as follows:

> As a heuristic device, intersectionality references the ability of social phenomena such as race, class, and gender to mutually construct one another... [it can be used to] think through social institutions, organizational structures, patterns of social interactions, and other social practices on all levels of social organization (p. 205).

The present study recognized Black women as "agents of knowledge" by examining the experiences of Black women from their own words and personal experiences to learn about them individually and as a group within society (Collins, 1998, p. 177). The intersectional framework did not inherently privilege one aspect of identity over the others; however, it recognized that their "salience varies among and within groups" (Collins, 1998, p. 208) and that the analyses of power in various contexts served to "reveal which differences carry significance" (Tomlinson, 2013 as found in Cho et al, 2013, p. 798). As such, the study shed light on how inextricable students perceived these aspects of their identities and how these influenced the ways they saw the world, and in turn, how the world viewed them. Patterns of social interactions as evidenced in the specific racialized and gendered situations that students shared in their in-person interviews aided in the analysis of power dynamics for women in this population individually and as a social group on campus.

Approaches that considered each of the factors of Black women's identities independently or in binary relationships ignored the ways in which these facets "mutually construct one another" which is essential to understanding the meaning these women make around their experiences (Collins, 1998, p. 205). Centering the study on the more inclusive analysis of the lived experiences of women of color was one of the trademark contributions of this analytical method. The present study considered the "multiple axes" of gender and race within the social contexts of campus life for academically talented college students in a holistic way, an approach not taken in previous studies. This population had also not been considered in previous intersectional studies. A deeper

discussion of the assumptions associated with intersectionality and notable studies are included in chapter two.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the experiences of high-achieving Black women was an important yet often overlooked part of fostering student success in college, particularly at PWIs. The emergence of studies in higher education on undergraduates of color over the last ten years focused on the experiences of Black men of a variety of ability types, expanding the knowledge on that population (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2005; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Pearson & Kohl, 2010; Strayhorn, 2009). From that body of research came valuable information about how to enhance the academic environment for Black men (Bonner & Bailey, 2006), best practices for specific interventions which support the needs of Black men through mentoring or community-building organizations (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006; Baker, 2006), and patterns and outcomes of their engagement in campus life (Harper, 2005; Strayhorn & DeVita, 2010; Harper & Quaye, 2007). For example, according to Comeaux (2013), “Black male collegians' campus involvement is often time grossly diminished because of an oppressive and discriminatory campus climate influence and perpetuated by significant members of the college community," one that can discourage their participation socially or academically (p. 454). Although these studies made major contributions, there was a general lack of similar research on Black women, especially high-achievers.

Patton and Croom’s (2017) edited volume on Black women and college success addressed part of that gap. Some of the leading and emerging scholars in higher

education research on Black women provided a historical and generational perspective of Black women (Stewart, 2017), examination of identity politics (Porter, 2017), and strategies for institutionalizing support for Black women undergraduates (Shaw, 2017). Only one of the chapters focused on high-achievers: Johnson (2017) examined the experiences of working-class Black women attending an Ivy League university. This dissertation study contributed to the field by addressing the gender and the high-achievement gap in higher education research.

Studies showed that environments at PWIs posed a number of challenges to students of color; spaces could be experienced differently by different people with membership to a variety of group identities (Steele, 2010). For Black high-achieving women, their position at the intersection of multiple oppressions played a role in how they made meaning around college life. Campus life mirrored the patterns of racial organization in greater society through its "racial marginalization, racial segregation of social and academic networks" and underrepresentation inside and outside the classroom by faculty and university staff (Steele, 2010, p. 26); as such, there needed to be more attention paid to the meaning that high-achieving Black women perceived their various identities had in those contexts. This study examined how salient various identities were to high-achieving Black women in college individually and collectively, revealing the ways institutional oppression functioned at PWIs and in social interactions on and off campus.

CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Few studies examined the experiences of high-achieving students at the undergraduate level, and even fewer discussed Black women within that population. The criteria for the definition of high-achieving undergraduates was problematic in practice and in the literature. While the research on high-achieving adolescents was becoming less obscure, much of the work focused on identifying or supporting talented students in K-12 schooling and failed to consider postsecondary experiences. Primary and secondary school programs used aptitude and IQ testing to evaluate students' intellectual ability, often placing talented students in special resource groups away from their peers or giving them access to unique academic or extracurricular resources, such as art or music programs. The importance of testing at the college level was apparent but its use and threshold of excellence varied among institutions. The following section is a discussion of the varying categorizations of academically talented college students and a review of notable research and practices in higher education on high-achievers. In consideration of terminology in the literature and professional practice, the terms academically talented, high-achieving, and honors are used interchangeably in this analysis. The section that follows analyzes the literature associated with high-achieving college students and the experiences of Black undergraduates at PWIs. There is also a discussion of the politics of the social identities of the participants and applications of intersectionality.

High-Achieving Undergraduates

College level high-achievers were often identified by a range of qualifications for admittance to the university. As first-time applicants, they had high SAT scores and excellent grades in high school that earned them merit awards and admission to an honors or scholars program in college. They may also have taken numerous honors, Advanced Placement, and dual enrollment courses or participated in an International Baccalaureate program. Admission to honors varied by university; so precollege indicators may also include student involvement in high school or a letter of recommendation from a teacher or a general application process that also evaluated students' writing and critical thinking skills. Universities considered students that meet these criteria able to "achieve the highest levels of academic and professional success" (Solano, 1987 as found in Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007).

As matriculated students, the literature identified high-achievers by having at least a 3.0 college GPA, high IQs, and membership in a scholars or university honors program (Freeman, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Strayhorn, 2009). For example, in Griffin's (2006) study of high-achievers' motivation, all of the participants were affiliated with the honors program at the university. Another study focused on the academic achievement and psychological pressure of a group of merit scholars (Strayhorn, 2009). There was consistency in the field of the set of qualifications for high-achievers, but there was exclusivity in the identifiers that are used (Borland, 2004). A review of the National Collegiate Honors Council's "Official Online Guide to Honors Programs and Colleges" (2014) suggested that honors admissions qualifications vary by institution, but many screened participants based on scholastic achievement in high

school, standardized test scores, or an application which requests information about students' community or extracurricular involvement.

Students of color, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, historically underperformed on standardized tests including the SAT or ACT (JBHE, 2008). With a lack of scholastic opportunities such as AP courses to prepare them for such high-stakes tests (JBHE, 2008), the set of criteria used to identify high-achievement status easily missed talented and otherwise qualified young Black women (Borland, 2004). In their study of high-achievers, Harper and Quaye (2007) used a more inclusive approach to labeling high-achievers: based on students' college GPA, campus leadership and involvement, connections with faculty and staff, engagement in academic enrichment opportunities (such as research programs and internships), and numerous awards (p. 132). Although inconsistent with the literature, this multifaceted definition of academic talent offered a more holistic approach than academic standards alone. In order to include underrepresented populations, particularly at PWIs, high-achievement ability should not be characterized solely by students' performance in the classroom; social involvement and demonstration of character were also important factors in determining a student's ability to achieve.

As a practitioner of honors education, I observed that the customary characterization of honors students was not a model that fit for high-achieving Black female college students. The limitations of the current model were evident in the limited number of Black women served by honors programs. Although it was challenging to find a program that shared statistics about its ethnic diversity on its webpage, in the program for which I advised about three % of the honors population was Black women. This is a

smaller proportion than the institution at large, which had about eight % full-time undergraduate Black women. As intellectual and ethnic minorities at this PWI, Black female high-achievers were scarce.

As a researcher, I recognized that the customary indicators had limitations, particularly applied to students of color (Borland, 2004), but in order to identify students to participate in the study and to meet the standard practices of research in honors education, I chose honors college membership as the key identifier for high-achievement for this study (Griffin, 2006; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007) because there were not more comprehensive or consistent measures available for use. I selected Black women with membership in the honors college because I anticipated they would exhibit a variety of the criteria described in the literature to describe their academic talent, including strong secondary school and college GPA and a number of other academic and extracurricular qualifications.

In existing studies and institutional programs, some universities used students' precollege scholastic achievement to label them gifted. By collecting data in the spring semester, the present study departed from earlier research by using students with an established record of collegiate academic achievement demonstrated by their good standing in the honors college as well as their pre-college performance. One of the implications of this study was to influence admissions practice at institutions to be more inclusive of the diverse ways in which students demonstrate their academic talent, such as Harper and Quaye's association with extracurricular achievement and accolades.

Black Undergraduates at PWIs

As ethnic minorities on campus, the experiences of Black undergraduates differed from those of their white peers. Although "contemporary color barriers are certainly less visible" than in the past, the lack of overt signs of discrimination did not signify the end of racism (Bell, 1992, p. 5). Particularly on predominantly white college campuses, the threat of racist behavior toward Black students loomed in the classroom, in interactions with peers, and in campus life. Encountering racism was a part of everyday life for some students (Swim et al, 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). Suspicious staring, culturally insensitive comments, bad or rude service transactions, and having one's opinions ignored were just a few of the racist behaviors Black undergraduates have endured from their white peers (Swim et al, 2003; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). These unwelcoming experiences and the lack of a community of Black peers, faculty and staff for support made campus life isolating and unwelcoming (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000).

The literature referred to some of the offenses above as racist microaggressions, the "subtle and covert ways (i.e., private conversations) that racism manifests itself" (Solorzano et al, 2000, p. 60; Sellers & Shelton, 2003); they were the spoken or unspoken judgments others make about Black students' abilities or identities (p. 65). Everyday racism was also a common term in the literature, and described "mundane hassles that could be forgotten by the day's end as well as overt, severe actions" with lasting influence; they were "routine encounters with another's prejudice… and discriminatory behavior that pervade people's daily social interactions" (Swim et al, 2003, p. 40). On an interpersonal level, the cumulative effect of racist interactions made engaging with

majority peers tenuous inside and outside the classroom (Swim et al, 2003; Solorzano et al, 2000; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). And the lack of accurate and meaningful incorporation of Black perspectives in the curriculum was also a source of discouragement (Solorzano et al, 2000). Racist and discriminatory interactions left students feeling increasing discomfort, angry, exhausted, threatened, and continually bothered well after the initial incident (Swim et al, 2003; Solorzano et al, 2000). In their study of African American undergraduates' experiences with everyday racism, Swim et al (2003) found that over 50 % of students in the study reached out to friends and family for support after experiencing prejudicial situations (p. 62). They also found that many Black women responded directly to perpetrators, and tended to connect with friends about their situations more often than Black men. Some students also took action to address the negative situation (Swim et al, 2003). Encounters with racism were common among the students in the dissertation study, and it was intriguing to learn how they responded to similar challenges.

Stereotypes were another issue Black undergraduates faced. The assumptions others made about Black students in campus life were reflective of the way society viewed those individuals outside its bounds. Stereotypes are not solely a Black issue: any person can feel a threat to their identity based on the social groups to which they belong (Steele & Aronson, 1995). However, Steele (2010) argued that women in particular are susceptible: Winkle-Wagner would argue this applied to Black women in particular. Stereotypes could affect how students develop interpersonally, psychosocially, and impacted their intellectual performance individually and as a group (Steele, 2010). Depictions of Black people in the media as violent or unintelligent belied

the reality of Black undergraduates' lives, yet those were the impressions of Black people that they had to constantly be on guard against. Instead of simply studying or reading for class like their White peers, Black students sensed the additional pressure to validate their credibility in the classroom; the additional expense of energy required to be prepared to defend one's intellectual ability or other salient aspects of their identity could take a toll on students' academic self-confidence and hinder their performance (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001).

As there was heterogeneity in the Black undergraduate population, it was essential to acknowledge that Black men and women experienced college differently (Nasir et al, 2009; Stewart, 2009). The intersections of race and gender played a different role in the experiences, approaches to, and perspectives about campus life for Black women. Much more was known about Black men, however. For example, the disproportionately low number of Black men attending college compared to Black women and other ethnic groups was a notable concern (Cuyjet, 2006). Black men on campus had to counter the expectation that they were athletes (and that is how they were granted admission); women had to address their physical appearance – such as their hair and style of dress – which became a source of unwanted attention from their majority peers (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). The intentional student development resources available to students via organizations such as the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) help Black men demonstrated citizenship, exhibit "values-based leadership," and connected members with supportive campus resources (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006). General student organization involvement was connected to Black men's development as well (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Although scholars of the Black male experience argued the existence of a

gendered difference throughout the literature (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2005; Strayhorn, 2009), there was limited research on the experiences of Black undergraduate women to speak to their own distinctions (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; West et al, 2010) particularly for high-achieving students (Pearson & Kohl, 2010).

One study that addressed that void in the literature was *The Unchosen Me: Race, Gender, and Identity among Black Women in College.* In this critical ethnographic study, Winkle-Wagner (2009) examined how identity is imposed on Black women in college and proposed a new sociological-based approach to considering this group of students' development. Findings from this study were consistent with the literature about Black students' experiences with racism as a group and the individual impact of an unwelcoming campus community. Women in the study responded to race-related stress by intentionally performing their race in a manner opposite the stereotypes they faced in the classroom and leaning on campus resource programs for "financial, academic, emotional and social support" (p.73). The findings also provided new contributions to the knowledge on Black women's sense of identity. The students often felt the "dueling" pressures of being in the "spotlight" or invisible in the classroom, of constantly representing themselves or their entire racial group, and needing to navigate the expectations of "good womanhood" versus being a good student (p. 132). They struggled to control their "attitudes" among white peers and expressions of their "smartness" around other Black peers in order to fit in (p. 132). Of particular note was the students' inability to separate gender and race in their lives: "race was gendered, and gender was racialized" (p. 24). Winkle-Wagner's study provided a wealth of information about

Black women that enhanced my own understanding about the potential social and identity concerns that the students in my study may also face.

The complex identities of Black women required more attention in the research to address the inequality that hindered their college success. In order to succeed at PWIs, Black undergraduates had to find strategies to manage the race-related stress caused by the individual and institutional challenges they faced in that environment (Hoggard, Byrd & Sellers, 2012; Chwalisz & Greer, 2007). Despite the obstacles they faced, the literature indicated that a number of these students were successful: a reflection of their strength and resourcefulness (Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000).

There was a big problem: Black undergraduates should not have to struggle with challenges their white peers did not in order to be successful and contributive members of their campus community. As Patton and Croom (2017) argued, "Black women have been navigating higher education, while postsecondary institutions have been overwhelmingly irresponsible in addressing racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that affect Black women" (p. 3). Universities need to take the multifaceted identities of Black students, particularly high-achieving women, into consideration and address the needs of this population to facilitate the creation of a more inclusive campus climate.

Politics of Identity

The women at the center of this dissertation study had membership in a number of social groups. As women, high-achievers, and Black students, each of their various social identities played a role in how they made meaning around their experiences in campus life and through which they were subordinated in society within existing systems

of power. Each individual facet was important on its own, but as the literature suggested, in the lived experiences of many Black women, the overlap and mutual influence of these identities was too complex to consider their influences in isolation (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Collins, 1990). This section discusses these mutually influential identities in the lives of high-achieving Black undergraduate women, intersectionality as an instrumental theoretical approach and analytical framework for understanding those overlaps, and the impact of perceived identity threats that threaten their success. The section concludes with a reflection on the researcher's positionality as a high-achieving Black former undergraduate herself and her perspective as the researcher.

Gender Identity

As Winkle-Wagner (2009) argued in her examination of the unchosen identities Black women adapt in college, identities were dynamic; for the women in her study, and those in my own, the construct of race in their lives was "gendered and gender was racialized" (p.24). The ways in which race was performed by Black women was different from Black men's performances. Similarly, the ways white women embodied their gender was different than Black women's constructions of gender, but society's expectations and interpersonal interactions pressured Black women to perform in a different way than their white peers. There were particular norms and expectations prescribed to women in this group that are unique from other people in society and that shaped how these women navigated the world.

Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study of African American young women shed light on the gendered challenges faced by women in this population:

> Because of their racialized (perhaps even unchosen) category as African American or Black, the women [in her study] encountered particular gendered prescriptions that were intended solely for them based on their race and gender categories simultaneously. Hence, gender was ultimately unchosen in many of the same ways as race... raced and gendered tug-of-war (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 132).

Earlier studies on the experiences of Black undergraduate women also noted this complex relationship between gender and race, further arguing that "more attention should be paid to the educational, social, and political positions of African American women in postsecondary education" (Zamani, 2003). There was more than just sexism and patriarchy at play for Black women.

More recent research reiterated the overlaps in gender and racial identities and the role of structural issues (Porter & Dean, 2015). In their grounded theoretical study of Black women's identity development, Porter and Dean (2015) also found that for Black women gender did not operate apart from race in experiences at college. Those identities were intertwined. "Students often feel forced by systems and organizational structures to 'pick' a primary identity. African American women show up, exist, and survive through the lens of being both African American and female at the same time" (Porter & Dean, 2015, p. 136). People existing at the intersection of both identity groups could not remove aspects of one identity to embody the other on its own.

The literature suggested that students had an awareness of how the systems of power in society presented obstacles in relation to those identities. As one adolescent shared, "I know that being Black and being a woman, I am going to have to work harder to prove what I can do and what I can be" (Sanders, 1997). It was an unfortunate reality that these women faced challenges based on aspects of their identity that they could not

control or change. My study addressed how high-achieving Black women perceived their gender (in relation to other identities) in campus life to determine its importance in their experiences.

Racial Identity

Racial identity played a role in Black undergraduates' perceptions of and responses to the challenges they faced in college (Sellers, Chavous & Cooke, 1998; Williams, 1998), especially for high-achieving Black women. The limited research on the importance of racial identity on students' experiences employed the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI), a model which argued that racial centrality moderated an individual's understanding of how race impacted their life experiences and interactions with others (Sellers et al, 1998). Racial centrality and racial ideology were two of the four dimensions of racial identity examined by the MMRI. Racial centrality was an indicator of how important race was to an individual's self-concept or the way she generally defined herself (Sellers et al, 1998). This did not refer to an individual's understanding of what it meant to be Black (racial ideology), but instead of how central Blackness was to how she defined herself; this nuanced difference is unarticulated in some of the racial identity research, which conflated racial ideology with centrality (Sellers et al, 1998).

The salience of race played a role in how students were affected by racist experiences (Aronson & Inzlicht, 2004; Solorzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006), defined their cultural identity (Carter, 2006), assumptions others made about their potential for academic success (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), and how students themselves perceived the significance of their own achievement (Sanders, 1997). For

example, in her study of Black high school students' perceptions about racism and discrimination, Sanders (1997) found that students' awareness of discrimination and their commitment to defying the stereotypes associated with their race fueled their motivation for achievement. Students in the study used their strong sense of racial pride to achieve despite the anticipated obstacles associated with their race. The importance of race to the students' personal identity made them want to prove their abilities as equal to other groups by outperforming them. As suggested by results from pilot research for this dissertation study, high-achieving Black undergraduate women felt some of the same pressures to achieve and an awareness of the implications of their racial identity in society and on campus.

Sellers and Shelton (2003) found a complex relationship between racial identity and perceptions of racial discrimination; racial centrality was positively associated with how often individuals detected discriminatory experiences, and perceptions of racial discrimination were associated with psychological distress (p. 1089). They also theorized that students whom others perceive to be strongly associated with their race might be targeted for discrimination more than those for whom race is less central (p. 1091). Perceived racial discrimination harmed Black individuals immediately and over time in the form of anger, depression, low life satisfaction, intrusion, and avoidance of others (p. 1081). At PWIs like the dissertation study sites, where high-achieving Black women were outnumbered and often challenged about their belonging, these effects could be devastatingly harmful to their psychological wellbeing.

Environmental factors also played a role in individual and group experiences associated with race. Students' racial identities were created from social forces from the

institutional, group, and individual levels; they were complex and capable of shifting as their meanings did in their manifestations in universities, communities, and among groups of people (Carter, 2006). In their study on constructions of race and academic identity in an urban public high school, Nasir, McLaughlin, and Jones (2009) found that local and distal context shape the way racial and academic identities were developed on the individual and group level. Expression of these identities was based on students' participation in school and community contexts, and the "norms, conventions, and available roles within cultural practices in these institutional settings" (p. 101). Social practices within an environment could also reflect how particular racial groups were accepted in their schooling environment (Carter, 2006, p.307). The students in Nasir et al's study differed from the high-achieving Black undergraduates in this dissertation study because of their engagement with a predominantly Black schooling setting. Their homogenous racial setting prevented students from needing to "straddle culturally" across racial groups as part of their identity expression (Carter, 2006); I anticipated that the predominantly white context of my study site would mean that participants in this dissertation would have the opposite experience.

Another study focusing on racial climate for Black students found that a negative racial climate and the racial microaggressions that occurred on campus had a harmful impact on students' academic and social lives (Solórzano et al, 2000). The prevalence of racist situations encountered by the participants in the study indicated that although some campuses could give the impression of equality, they were not race-neutral and not all members of the campus community were welcomed (Solórzano et al, 2000, p. 71). As college campuses were reflections of the greater society, the racialized, gendered, and

academic setting of the university reinforced the systems of power that functioned to maintain Black people's subordination at the individual and institutional levels. Racial identity alone could not explain all of the impact or impressions of Black undergraduates' experience (Sellers et al, 1998), particularly for high-achieving Black women undergraduates. As Stewart (2009) argued, "Black students' perceptions of their identities may be much more complex than simply negotiating matters of race and the place of race in their self-concepts, meaning-making, and relationships with others" (p. 268). My study supported this argument by examining the mutual influences of gender, race and academic identities of the high-achieving Black undergraduate women at the center of this study.

Academic Identity and Performance

As with racial identity, existing research argued that the nature of environments had an impact on how students develop their sense of academic identity. In one study, the complex meanings that African American high school students attributed to their academic identity was informed by the attitudes and practices in their school context (Nasir et al, 2009). That same study found a predictive positive relationship for students with high ethnic identity and high academic achievement. Some researchers argued that there was a stigma against academic achievement among Black students because of its association with whiteness (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Often high-achievers or students that identified strongly with their academic identity were accused of "acting white" (Carter, 2006). In Carter's (2006) study on the experiences of performance of whiteness, students associated it with four aspects of behavior: verbal expressions by the group and its members, definition of boundaries for the group based on attire, style, and other

mannerisms; and the nature of association with other people in their ethnic group. However, a number of contemporary researchers' examinations of the "acting white" phenomenon argued that some Black students' resistance to doing well in school was more of a resistance to white normalcy than to getting good grades or valuing education (Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Spencer, Noll, Stoltzfus, & Harpalani, 2001).

As a result of the ways Black people were portrayed in the media and popular culture, and the cultural and social norms in the contexts in which they lived and were educated, there were a number of stereotypes associated with the academic identity of Blacks. Socially, there was pressure to represent a particular kind of Blackness that was commonly associated with "speaking stupid" (Carter, 2006) or having an "attitude" (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These stereotypes reflected a social perception that "producing intellectual work was generally not attributed to Black women artists and political activists. Such women were typically thought of as nonintellectual and nonscholarly, classifications that created a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing" (Collins, 1990, p. 15). Given the pervasiveness of these perspectives, the idea of a smart Black woman as an oxymoron more than an unlikely reality for a group of undergraduates attending a PWI had some grounding.

Black undergraduates, particularly high-achieving Black women, faced a number of challenges in their college experience. The layers and interactions among the identities of these Black women in college were complex. Navigating their lives along the margins of the academic and social spaces at PWIs could have lasting effects on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Racial, gender, and academic identity (individually and in combination) influenced how high-achieving Black undergraduate women made meaning

around their experiences individually and as a group. They also played a role in understanding their place on campus and in society as people at the intersections of multiple systems of power. Taken alone or in binaries, race or gender or academic identity only explained a fraction of this population's positionality on campus or within the greater social landscape. Although the centrality of these identity facets varied among students, awareness of the potential influence of the various aspects of these identities was essential to the development of supports that effectively met the needs of this population on college campuses (Sellers et al, 1998). The present study fosters such awareness and offers strategies for support.

Intersectionality

Black women high-achieving undergraduates exist at the intersection of multiple social and identity groups. Crenshaw (1991) argued that because of their unique position in society, "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (p. 1244). Collins (1991) argued similarly, that "Black women's concrete experiences as members of specific race, class, and gender groups as well as [our] concrete historical situations necessarily play significant roles in our perspectives on the world" (p. 33). People are more than just one single isolated part of their identity – particularly Black women who were centered in this framework from a Black feminist standpoint: they are complex social actors whose backgrounds and perceptions play a role in how they experience the world and how others perceive and respond to them. Intersectional theory supported this idea: its description of identities as "categories not as

distinct but as always in the process of creating and being related by dynamics of power" fostered the consideration of the various layers of identity of individuals and groups in various contexts (Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013, p. 759; Collins, 2012).

By utilizing an intersectional framework to understand the experiences of high-achieving Black undergraduate women, the present study examined how the interactions of their multifaceted identities and their oppressed positions within a system of power played a role in the challenges they faced inside and outside the classroom. In its diverse intellectual iterations, intersectionality "helps reveal how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of over-lapping identity categories" (Cho et al, 2013, p. 797). This multilayered examination was what enabled intersectionality to address social problems in a way that traditional methods could not (Hancock, 2007).

Three tools used to examine how power works through overlapping identities were structural, political, and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Structural intersectionality referred to how the intersecting identities of Black women – such as race, gender, and class – made their experiences different from others that shared aspects of those identities; the lack of consideration of those differences in the law and other social policies meant to support them as members of different racial or gender groups often limited the availability of resources to this population (Crenshaw, 1991). One example was the provision of support services for women of color at battered women's shelters. Although these centers were meant to aid women after violent domestic abuse situations, the women that needed their services faced other pressing barriers that were reflections of their multiple oppressions. In addition to needing

counseling, they often lacked employment, childcare, or alternative housing to the violent household (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1299). Women who were not of color and of higher social class may have had access to supportive friends and family or other resources, which enabled them to prioritize addressing the violence instead of the other issues that forced women of color into submission (Crenshaw, p. 1299). With limited resources and funding, not all shelters were equipped to support this range of needs for its clientele.

Political intersectionality examined the importance of "inequalities and their intersections to political strategies" (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). More specifically, it addressed the problem that Black women occupied a space in "subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" – namely people of color or women (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). Antiracist arguments often neglected the issue of patriarchy, omitting the concerns of Black people who were also women; feminism lacked consideration of the discrimination faced by women who were also Black. As a result, Black women remained disempowered on both fronts (p. 1241). Political intersectionality connected theory to practice by offering a method of resisting power through political and social action (Cho et al, 2013, p. 800).

Representational intersectionality referred to the "cultural construction" of Black women in society (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1245). Analyses of this nature focused on how the reproduction of gender and racial hierarchy fostered particular images of and marginalized Black women (p. 1283). For example, after slavery ended, four types of roles were constructed for Black women in society. First, the mammy: a loyal servant that took care of her white family. The matriarch was the strong, Black, emasculating mother that failed to conform to the white norms of motherhood and whose children were

failing (and will remain poor) because she did not give them enough care. The welfare mother was lazy and represents the slave "breeder woman" (Collins, 1991, p. 76). Finally, the Jezebel was an aggressive woman with an "excessive sexual appetite" whose persona was used to define Black women's sexuality historically and in popular culture depictions (Collins, 1991, p. 78). Intersectionality could be used as a tool to address how these particular images of Black women subordinated Black women racially, sexually, and by gender and were reflective of the intersecting power relations that affected them because of their social location. Based on the pilot research for my study, I anticipated that the representational intersectionality would provide a useful framework for analysis of the social issues students raised as part of their experiences as high-achieving undergraduate Black women at a PWI.

Researchers in a number of disciplines incorporated intersectionality into their examination of social issues. From psychology (Cole, 2009) to sociology (Choo & Ferree, 2010) to political science (Hancock, 2007) and educational research (Nunez, 2014), this framework has transcended its original contextual specialization on the experiences of Black women. Each iteration of the approach served to "amplify its generative focus as an analytical tool to capture and engage contextual dynamics of power" (Cho et al, 2013, p. 788). For example, intersectionality provided a framework to examine the inequity in educational access and opportunity of Latino im/migrant students' experiences in high school and college outreach programs in California (Nunez, 2014, p. 87). Nunez's study employed a multilevel model of intersectionality to analyze the social categories and relations, and multiple arenas of influence within particular historical contexts and their impact on students' experiences.

In sociological applications, Choo & Ferree (2010) classified intersectional analyses into three areas: group-centered, process-centered, and system-centered (p. 130). They incorporated intersectionality into their critique of the ways prominent sociological texts, such as Edin & Kefalas's *Promises I Can Keep* (2005), overlooked the implications of the multiple oppressions of the groups at the center of their studies and normalized the values of their middle-class reading audience. Intersectionality was also described as a key to political scientists' ability to "more comprehensively answer questions of distributive justice, power, and government function that are central to the discipline of political science and central to [our] world"; one such concern was finding ways to get political groups to cooperate in order to ensure more inclusive access to resources for all constituents, but especially those that lay at the intersection of those groups (Hancock, 2007, p 250).

Hancock (2007) argued that six assumptions guided intersectional approaches. More than one facet of a group or individual's identity was involved in analyzing social political issues. Although each of the identity facets mattered individually and should be addressed, examining them together (instead of each in isolation) produced a richer illustration of the individual or group experience because of influence of each facet on the other. Identity facets manifested and were contested at the micro- and macro- levels of society; studies should therefore discuss how multifaceted identities interact with political or social issues at those levels. There was heterogeneity among individuals within identity groups that should be considered in the development of any solutions to political issues. As an empirical and analytical framework, intersectionality should be used to guide the theoretical approach and may use multiple methods to address an issue (p. 251).

Although Hancock was a political scientist, her qualification of intersectional analyses applied broadly, transcending the bounds of her field and characterizing the work generally.

This dissertation study met Hancock's (2007) content and paradigmatic criteria; it also addressed the limitations and common critiques of this approach by considering how systems of power play a role in high-achieving Black undergraduate women's individual experiences, as well as the way this reflected their position in organizations (such as the university) and greater society. This study aimed to "illuminate how intersecting axes of power and inequality operate to [our] collective and individual disadvantage and how these very tools, these ways of knowing, may also constitute structures of knowledge production that themselves can be the object of intersectional critique" (Cho et al, 2013, p. 796). By drawing the connections across the micro-, meso-, and macrolevel interactions, this study moved intersectional analysis and the knowledge about these women's place on campus and in society forward.

Identity Threat

Stereotype threat was an identity contingency that constrained people to behave according to the expectations others had for them to reinforce society's perceptions of their membership within a particular identity group. Steele (2010) describes the power of stereotypes as "floating in the air like a cloud" which "shap[e] our lives and society" (p. 7). As Steele argued, this threat could be experienced by anyone with any identity - male, female, Black, young, and so on - but that if these threats were acknowledged then groups or individuals can take action to change societal expectations and how these issues affected individuals.

A number of conditions contributed to high-achieving Black female undergraduate women's marginalization in college (Steele, 2010). Steele argued that there could be a "concentration of factors" which affected how Black students experience college, Steele (2010) pointed to the ways in which campus life mirrored the patterns of racial organization in greater society through its "racial marginalization, racial segregation of social and academic networks" and underrepresentation inside and outside the classroom by faculty and university staff (p. 26). Based on findings from the pilot research, these factors were still salient to the experiences of high-achieving Black women attending PWIs.

The salience of various aspects of students' identities made them susceptible to stereotypes associated with those particular group memberships. For high-achieving Black women, their position at the intersection of multiple social groups intensifies the potential threat to their identity. For students for whom their intellectual identity was most salient, assumptions people made about their high-achievement ability could adversely affect their performance in private (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2003) and in public settings (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Research suggested that minority status could be challenging for a member of any group in an environment, but particularly for women because of the existence of stereotypes about their abilities (Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2003). The women in the present study, however, occupied more than one place within the system of power and were multiply influenced by the structural and interpersonal challenges associated with that and other aspects of their identities. In the case of Black high-achieving undergraduate women, others' expectations for their behaviors were reflections of the assumptions society made about numerous aspects of their identities –

their Blackness, their gender, and their intellectual ability – in a way that other students, particularly white students that were the majority group on college campuses, did not have to endure.

The threat loomed over their interactions with others due to their commitment to that part of how they identify. Although there was value in acknowledging and understanding the intersectionality of these students' multifaceted identities, understanding how some of the members of this particular group viewed the importance of their academic performance spoke to their level of concern about the "prospect of confirming the negative stereotype upsetting enough to interfere with that performance" (Steele, p. 98). This study explored how participants viewed the relative importance of the various aspects of their identities in order to facilitate the development of appropriate supports based on their needs.

Summary of the Literature

There were a number of gaps in the extant literature. First, Black women were an understudied population in higher education research. In addition, there were limited identity studies that went beyond the inclusion of students of color in the sample population and addressed the importance of various social identities, their contexts, and how they shaped students' experiences and perceptions of the world. Research on the lived experiences of high-achieving undergraduates generally, and Black women specifically, were also lacking in the literature. This dissertation study addressed each of these gaps using an intersectional framework to address the intersecting oppressions that shape the experiences of high-achieving Black undergraduate women in an effort to produce strategies for their support inside and outside the classroom.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This dissertation study used qualitative research methods to examine the experiences of high-achieving Black undergraduate women inside and outside the classroom. This section discusses the design and findings from the pilot study, and outlines the dissertation study including the research site, participants, and data collection and analysis methods.

Pilot Study

In 2014, I conducted a study on high-achieving Black women using data from undergraduates in the honors college at Atlantic University, a large urban predominantly white research institution. This pilot study addressed two research questions: What were the experiences of Black high-achieving college students inside and outside the classroom at a predominantly white urban university, and which aspects of their identity were most salient to the meaning high-achieving Black women make around their experiences in college? Participants were recruited using a targeted email to students of color in the honors program and group Facebook posts to members of associated student organizations. After obtaining their consent, participants' membership in the program was verified and current GPA was determined in consult with honors staff based on students' academic records. After completing an electronic background questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at the campus library. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to aid data analysis.

The purpose of the pilot was to test the data collection instruments, specifically to

determine if the information students shared in their responses about their personal identity and experiences effectively addressed the research questions based on the protocol prompts. Eight interviews were conducted, but due to complications with one of the audio recordings, one interview did not have a complete transcription. Reflecting on my experience with the pilot study, I made the most of this opportunity to examine and improve my approach as a researcher and anticipate adjustments that were needed for the dissertation study (Seidman, 2006).

The process of the pilot study was very informative for both the interview protocol and the exploration of common issues among this population on campus. Although students indicated that they understood the questions, there were a few lines of questioning on identity about which students consistently requested clarification. Those questions were reworked and the sections were consolidated to improve the flow of interviews for the dissertation study.

Data analysis for the pilot was an iterative process that occurred during and after the data collection phase of the study (Lichtman, 2010). I incorporated Seidman's (2006) approach to analyzing interview data by creating a participant profile after each interview that included their responses to the background questionnaire and my observations from our interaction. Transcripts from each interview were closely read, and I created memos to track themes in the experiences across the interviews. Basic ideas and information from each passage were classified into codes. After coding a few interviews, I consolidated similar codes and proceeded to code the remaining interviews using a consistent code tree. Codes were sorted into categories and then into concepts or themes that were significant to the topic of interest: the intersectionality of issues of gender, race,

and high-achievement status (Lichtman, 2010).

A few themes emerged from the interviews: 1) women in this study were commonly the only person of color in their classes with other high-achievers, 2) tension among their performance and perceptions of their intersecting identities of being smart Black women, particularly in their social interactions with peers, and 3) racialized and gendered experiences were subtle inside the classroom but overt in other environments. Overall, findings from the pilot confirmed the researcher's expectation that high-achieving Black undergraduate women faced personal, interpersonal, and structural challenges in several areas of campus life as a result of their intersecting identities. This dissertation study shed light on those obstacles, the strategies women in this group used to overcome them, and argued the importance of addressing the unique needs of the students in this population at PWIs.

Qualitative Research Study

The purpose of the present study was to understand how academically talented Black undergraduate women overcome the challenges in their college experience. Two research questions guided this study: 1) what were the experiences of Black high-achieving college women inside and outside of the classroom at a predominantly white university? and 2) which aspects of their identity were most salient to the meaning high-achieving Black women made around their experiences in college? The open-ended and exploratory nature of the research questions made qualitative methods the most appropriate approach to understanding the experiences of the women in the study. Qualitative methods examine how people make meaning around their life experiences, interactions, or discourse in their everyday lives (Lichtman, 2010; Bogdan & Biklen,

1998). This method addressed how and why questions, and operated from the assumption that knowledge was socially constructed and subjective: that diverse participants had varying experiences that shaped their perspectives and realities (Lichtman, 2010; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The qualitative researcher is her own research tool; as such, I interacted with participants to collect data and engage in an interpretive process to determine how they understand the nature of their identities and how they overcome the challenges they face as undergraduates (Creswell, 2009). Recognizing that my context as a researcher was central to the interpretive lens used to understand the students' experiences, consistent with the practices of qualitative inquiry, I aimed to position the participants as the experts in order to allow them to share their own voices in the research (Denzin, 2007; Lichtman, 2010). This qualitative approach illustrated the complexity of the challenges this group of high-achieving Black undergraduate women experienced by addressing the many layers of those challenges (Creswell, 2009).

Research Sites: Polytech University and Atlantic University

One site for the study was Polytech University, a private urban research institution located near the city's bustling downtown commerce area and bordering a neighborhood with high property values. It granted doctorates, was a high research activity university Carnegie Classification, had about 200 academic degree programs and 15 academic colleges. It was founded in the late 1800s and had a reputation for its highly-selective science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs as well as its focus on experiential learning. According to its website, there were about 17,000 undergraduates as of fall 2015. Nearly half of undergraduates were from out of state and

about 15 % were international students. The university was predominantly white (56 %); the rest of the undergraduate population was 13 % international, 12 % Asian, 7 % Black/African American, and 6 % Hispanic/Latino students. Multiracial students represented 3 % of undergraduates and 3 % of students' ethnicities were unknown.

The Honors College at Polytech

The Honors College was created in the early 1990s and featured a small community of students from across the university's majors. It represented the university's commitment to invest in its most promising students seeking an enhanced learning experience at college. Its mission was to enhance the intellectual and experiential aspects of high-achieving college students' experience at Polytech University through its offerings of unique opportunities and personalized advising. The college supported students in their pursuit of academic engagement and social involvement.

Polytech Honors College Requirements

Admissions. All applications to Polytech University were evaluated for admission to the Honors College. Exceptional students that were admitted to Polytech University were invited to participate in the college as part of their admissions package. Incoming and current students, including transfer students, were also able to apply directly to the Honors College for admission. All prospective students were evaluated based on their high school academic record, standardized test scores, extracurricular involvement, and demonstrated leadership potential. According to the website, qualified current student applicants had at least a 3.75 GPA, demonstrated a record of engagement in campus and community life, and positive student conduct.

Good Standing and Completing the Honors Curriculum. In order to earn the Honors College notation on their academic transcript, students had to complete all of the course and experiential requirements and maintain at least a 3.2 GPA (3.5 for distinction status). During their time at the university, students maintained their good standing in the college by completing a series of honors courses and colloquia. As upperclassmen, they were required to complete experiential learning projects such as independent studies or major or career-related practical experiences. Students that failed to make progress in the areas of GPA, course or experiential requirements could be dismissed from the program. Some of the benefits of Honors College membership included access to dedicated study and residential community spaces, unique leadership opportunities in honors student organizations, discussion-oriented classes with low student-faculty ratios, and support from honors staff. Honors students also had priority course registration, and after completing the program requirements could earn distinction status upon graduation.

Atlantic Honors College

The pilot study site, Atlantic University, served as the second site for the study. All of the Atlantic participants were full-time undergraduates at the state-affiliated urban research university. Atlantic was moderately selective, granted doctorates, was a high research activity university Carnegie Classification, and had about 450 academic degree programs, including 150 undergraduate programs across 13 academic colleges. It was also founded in the late 1800s, with the purpose of providing educational opportunities for the city's working class. A low-income housing project and homes with lower property value neighbored the campus.

According to its website, there were about 28,000 undergraduates as of fall 2015. Most students were in-state, with less than 25 % of undergraduates from out of state and about 6 % international students. The university was predominantly white (56 %); the rest of the undergraduate population was less than 1 % American Indian or Pacific Islander, 6 % international, 10 % Asian, 13 % Black/African American, and 6 % Hispanic/Latino students. Multiracial students represented 3 % of undergraduates and 6 % of students' ethnicities were unknown. At the time of the dissertation study, there were about 2,000 honors students. Black women made up less than 15 % of full-time undergraduates and only about 3 % of the honors population.

Atlantic Honors College Requirements

Admissions. All incoming freshmen were evaluated based on the overall strength of their application to the university for admission to the Honors College, similar to Polytech admits. Although Atlantic was less selective than Polytech, recent enhancements to the merit aid levels made the university more attractive to academically talented prospective students. Students whom the admissions office awarded the highest level of merit scholarship were automatically admitted to honors, and most of those at the second tier were admitted to the Honors College as part of their admissions package. Current Atlantic students and transfers were able to apply directly to the Honors College during the academic year via the College's webpage, which included short answer questions about the student's interests, plans for taking honors courses and doing research. According to the staff, qualified current student applicants had at least a 3.7 GPA, though most admits were higher

Good Standing and Completing the Honors Curriculum. In order to graduate from the Honors College, students needed to complete at least 10 Honors courses and maintain a 3.25 cumulative GPA. Four of those courses needed to be at an advanced level. Courses were offered across the university curriculum with most concentrated in liberal arts, the sciences, and business, which were the most popular colleges among Honors students. Students whose GPA fell below 3.25 or did not progress with coursework were dismissed from the college, but were offered the opportunity to return if they could bring their GPA back up to the required level.

Participants

A purposive sample of students was selected from individuals who responded to a call for participation via email from the staff of the honors college at Polytechnic University or Atlantic University. Of the 21 students that submitted the background questionnaire, 16 people completed both the online background questionnaire and participated in in-person interviews. All participants in the study were full-time undergraduate traditionally-aged women affiliated with the honors college at Polytech or Atlantic University. For the purpose of this study, membership in the honors college denoted high-achievement status. Students were selected based on their race or ethnicity as indicated on the background questionnaire. All of the participants self-identified with racial identities which included African-American or Black. Half of the participants were first-generation Americans whose parents immigrated from the West Indies or West Africa. All of the participants considered themselves at least partially American-identified, and each came of age in the United States.

There were few differences between the students from the two sites. Aside from the strong likelihood for Polytech students to major in science or technology (STEM), the students were comparable in their family and other background criteria. As such, this study analyzed the data from all of the students together - since the students' experiences were the focus and not their honors colleges - but kept the differences in institutional contexts in mind during data analysis.

Academic Programs

Participants varied in their class year, academic field of study, and anticipated career fields. Table. 3.1 displays the participant demographic information including age, class year, and the field of study. Students from Polytech are indicated with an asterisk.

Table 3.1
Participant Demographics

Name	**Age**	**Class year**	**Field of study**
Anissa	17	Freshman	STEM*
Lauryn	18	Freshman	Health profession
Grace	18	Freshman	Arts*
Shantel	18	Freshman	Social Sciences
Aisha	18	Freshman	Health profession
Mia	19	Freshman	Health profession
Keshia	19	Sophomore	Health profession
Zoe	19	Sophomore	Humanities
Crystal	19	Sophomore	STEM
Michelle	19	Sophomore	Health profession
Amber	19	Sophomore	Social Sciences
Serena	19	Sophomore	STEM
Miranda	20	Junior	Social Sciences
Nicole	20	Junior	Business
Jacqueline	21	Senior	Arts
Shannon	22	Senior	STEM*

Students in the study were all traditional aged college students, ranging from 17 to 22 years old. There were first-semester freshmen through seniors and all but one anticipated

graduating within four years. The fifth year senior was pleased with her extra time at the college as it afforded her more than one full term internship for academic credit. Most of the students were freshmen or sophomores. Many of the students also mentioned taking advanced placement courses in high school to earn prior credits for college.

Students majored in academic disciplines across the humanities to STEM to business, as illustrated in Table 3.1. STEM majors included computer and information sciences, and biology. Health professions included public health, nursing, and communications science and disorders majors. Humanities and social sciences included English, political science, and sociology. Arts included music and design majors. Ten of the students were also enrolled in certificate, minor or pre-professional tracks. Their average GPA was a 3.6 on a 4.0 scale.

Nearly all of the students planned to pursue additional degrees after completing college. Only one seemed concerned about her ability to finish college, citing her high financial need and the understanding that extenuating circumstances could arise to get her off track. Despite any challenges, she still planned to pursue graduate studies. The one student unsure of her post graduate plans felt that more formal education was not a necessity to progress in her industry. Students had high academic aspirations. Half planned to earn a master's degree, while the remaining students anticipated some form of doctorate, including medical and law degrees. Participants were aspiring epidemiologists, nurses and pediatricians; designers, lawyers, military and government officials, IT consultants, financial analysts, authors and music producers.

Family Background

The background questionnaire inquired about parents, their educational completion, and family income. All of the students listed their guardians as their mother and father. One participant indicated her mother was the only parent, but shared some information about her father during her interview. Nearly all of the students were co-parented, though a few had parents who were divorced or remarried. Most of the students had siblings, some of whom had attended or anticipated going to college as well.

Table 3.2
Family Education and Income Levels

Highest level education: parent/guardian #1	**Parent/ guardian #1**	**Highest level education: parent/guardian #2**	**Parent/ Guardian #2**	**Estimated annual family income**
Associate's or technical degree	Mother	GED	Father	$30,000 - $49,999
Bachelor's degree	Mother	Master's degree	Father	$30,000 - $49,999
High school diploma	Mother	Some college	Father	$30,000 - $49,999
Some college	Mother	Some college	Father	$30,000 - $49,999
Some college	Mother	Bachelor's degree	Father	$50,000 - $99,999
Associate's or technical degree	Mom	High school diploma	Dad	$50,000 - $99,999
Bachelor's degree	Mother	Master's degree	Father	$50,000 - $99,999
Master's degree	Mother	Master's degree	Father	$50,000 - $99,999
Bachelor's degree	Mother	Master's degree	Father	above $100,000
Master's degree	mother	Bachelor's degree	father	above $100,000
Master's degree	Mother	Bachelor's degree	Father	above $100,000
Master's degree	Mother	Bachelor's degree	father	above $100,000
Bachelor, pursuing Masters	Mother	N/A	N/A	above $100,000
Bachelor's degree	Mother	Master's degree	Father	above $100,000
Master's degree	Mother	Master's degree	Father	above $100,000
Master's degree	Mother	Some college	Father	above $100,000

Table 3.2 illustrates estimated family income and parents' degree completion. As the background data were self-reported, the income levels may be inaccurate. According to the nearby state middle class levels identified by data from the Pew Charitable Trust Foundation, none of the participants were from below middle class (Kane & Keirsz,

2015). All of the participants were from families earning above $30,000 per year. About 25 % were lower middle class, another 25 % were in the middle, and the remaining 50 % were upper middle class or higher, earning more than $100,000 per year. Another marker of social class and economic background was the students' discussion of their employment during college. Among the four students that indicated they had jobs during the academic year, only one mentioned working more than 20 hours per week: that same student was not in any student groups. The other employed students worked between 15 and 20 hours per week and used their funds to supplement their college costs. Their families and merit, financial or other funding sources covered most of their major expenses. Most mentioned internships or summer jobs to save up money for the academic year.

None of the students were first-generation college goers, but two would be among the first in their family to pursue a traditional four-year education. Some of the parents completed associates or technical programs at other kinds of institutions. Four of the participants would be the first generation to successfully complete a bachelor's degree: some of the parents had attended but not completed college. Overall, participants were from solvent middle class relatively educated families.

Students were primarily raised in the United States; two had spent some time growing up abroad in Europe and the Middle East. Nearly half of the students were the children of immigrants; all but one of the participants were born in the United States. The families of the first-generation Americans were predominantly from West Africa and the Caribbean, including Nigeria, Ghana, Trinidad, and Cameroon. The prominence of students from immigrant families among this small group of high-achievers was

reflective of their burgeoning population in the United States and at American universities in recent years, particularly at elite institutions (Massey, Mooney, Torres & Charles, 2007; Mwangi & Fries-Britt, 2015). Since all of the participants came of age in the United States, the researcher anticipated that their acculturation reflected an understanding of and immersion in American social practices prior to college. American society may force people of different nationalities into the same racial group in the United States, but the reality was that there could be stark differences in understanding among people who were socialized with American customs and social attitudes from those who were socialized elsewhere with a different set of norms and cultural contexts. With the prominence of immigrant families among the participants, however, I understood that values associated with their nationality and ethnicity played a role in the students' experiences. As noted by Mwangi and Fries-Britt (2015), "Black immigrants often experience issues of race, racism, and discrimination in ways different from Black Americans and non-Black immigrants." Those differences play a role in their adjustment to and experiences within campus life. No international students applied for the study, but in the case they had, they would not have been eligible participants because of the anticipated differences in their socialization from other participants.

Data Sources and Collection

The full process of gaining access and data collection took from spring 2015 though summer 2016. Before beginning the study, prior approval was obtained from the dean of the Honors College at Polytech University in late spring 2015 semester, which was submitted as part of the IRB approval process for my institution to verify approval

for the student researcher to conduct the study. This also verified the college's agreement to help with disseminating the call for participants via targeted emails to the population of interest.

Data were collected using a number of sources including in-person interviews, background questionnaire responses, and descriptive university statistics. The selection of these particular methods was informed by the qualitative interpretivist nature of the research questions and the intersectional theoretical perspective that shaped the approach to this study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). All of the data collection tools below were submitted at my institution and to the IRB at Atlantic University and Polytech University for approval prior to the collection of any data.

1. **Campus and Honors College demographic data**: This information was obtained from the Honors College staff at both institutions, the Atlantic and Polytech University institutional research offices, and the National Center for Education Statistics website (IPEDS).
2. **Background Questionnaire**: Prior to in-person interviews, participants shared their background information via a private (electronic) GoogleForm. This document collected information associated with students' personal academic achievement (e.g. high school and college GPA), goals (e.g. highest degree planned and career goals), socioeconomic status (e.g. household income, parent educational attainment), and self-defined racial identity. This criteria was included in the questionnaire in order to allow the in-person interviews to focus more deeply on students' perceptions about their identity and specific experiences instead of the collection of basic demographic data.

3. **Interviews**: A semi-structured interview was conducted with the dean of the Polytech honors college prior to interviewing undergraduates. This interview focused on learning about the culture of the honors college, the faculty and staff that work with honors students, and a general understanding about the history of the college and its context at the university.

Although it was anticipated that data collection would begin in summer 2015, infrequent and insufficient contact with the site coordinator at Polytech led to significant delays in the call for participants email. At the end of the fall 2015 term, only five subjects had responded to the background questionnaire and only two completed interviews or responded to communication from the researcher. Due to the poor response rate at Polytech, another call for participants was issued at Atlantic University at the start of spring 2016. Data collection was more fruitful at Atlantic and proceeded through the end of the semester.

A purposive sample of students was selected from individuals who responded to a call for participation via email from the staff of the honors college at each university. Sixteen students completed both the online background questionnaire and individual semi-structured in-person interviews between fall 2015 and spring 2016. Participants shared their availability for interviews as part of the background questionnaire. The researcher communicated with each participant to coordinate an interview based on her availability at an on or off-campus location of their preference. Interviews lasted 60 – 75 minutes, were audio recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Second interviews, which were also

in-person, served as member checks and a follow-up to discuss themes from across the first interviews. They lasted 45 - 60 minutes.

Particular areas of focus for the student interviews were 1) how high-achieving Black women perceive the importance of the various aspects of their identities in their social interactions in campus life, and 2) how their perceptions of their own experiences in campus life reflected their identities. Examination of those two ideas provided indications of the ways systems of power in society were operative in campus life.

4. **Periodic memos**: I also used periodic memos during the data collection and analysis process to track my reactions to students' responses, the emergence of themes, or any other notable observations. I incorporated the approach used by Harper and Quaye's (2007) study as a model by writing memos or a "textural summary" for each participant to help me track "*what* each high-achiever experienced" and "*how* [she] experienced the phenomenon" respectively of being an academically talented student at a PWI (p. 133). This process facilitated a streamlined process from examining similarities or differences among participants in an accessible format.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was iterative and occurred during and after the data collection period of the study. Descriptive data about the site population and the participant demographics were analyzed as soon as they were available. This information included socioeconomic background, academic major, academic and professional goals, and self-

defined ethnic and racial identities as indicated in the background questionnaire responses. Analysis of the interview transcripts, the composition of analytical memos, and preliminary coding were all ongoing during the study.

Prior to the start of student interviews, a provisional list of 18 codes were created based on the research questions and theoretical framework shaping the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the major source of data, interviews were transcribed and read closely to identify important ideas (Seidman, 2006). Categories of codes were also created based on the sections of the interview protocol including relationships with family and friends, high-achieving term definitions, performance of identity, classroom and social experiences, and aspirations. Memos, bracketed reactions in the transcripts, textural and structural summaries (Harper & Quaye, 2007), and participant profiles (Seidman, 2006) were used to help with early examination of additional important ideas in the data. I expanded the code list while closely reading and annotating all of the data, ending with 78 codes. Categories of codes were revised based on the significant concepts in the transcript data then combined to identify common themes across the students' experiences (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Narrative quotes or chunks from the transcriptions were classified by classroom or social context and around major concepts of the intersectionality theoretical perspective; separate files were created for each concept and associated data was collected using reports in Atlas.ti to analyze evidence supporting those concepts (Seidman, 2006). Comprehensive analysis of all data collected during the study occurred during the summer and fall after the completion of the data collection phase, during which the bulk of dissertation writing occurred. There were 97 codes in the final codebook, inclusive of thematic supercodes used for Atlas.ti searches.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Black women speaking for themselves was the best way to learn more about their experiences. The selection of qualitative interviews for the data collection method privileged these women's perspectives, providing them an opportunity to contribute their voices to the discourse on the college experience. Methodologically, the decision to consider the experiences of these students without a comparison group was to make their experiences central to the study. These experiences were valuable as sources without the need for comparison against a white or male normative group (West et al, 2010).

Reliability of the study procedures and the findings were supported in a variety of ways. Using the criteria outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) as a guide, the present study addressed the researcher's positionality in the site, connected findings to the data and the intersectional theoretical framework, and used coding checks to ensure dependability of the research (p. 278). As part of the data analysis process, a colleague reviewed the code book to ensure there was clarity in the coding scheme and that it was consistent with the research questions and interview protocol for the study. This inter-rater review served as an indicator of the fit and directness of explanations of the coding scheme for the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The result of the inter-coder check revealed a number of redundancies and overly detailed codes that did not directly address the focus of the study. Due to the differences in perceived code necessity, where appropriate, I consolidated a number of codes and clarified their parameters for application to better explain how various passages were labeled with each code.

Internal validity of the study and the data was supported by member-checks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After student in-person interviews, the researcher met with

each study participant in person to review the transcript of the communication and give her an opportunity to review what she shared with the researcher. This review meeting gave the student time to reflect on the interview and consider if there were areas of discussion on which she wanted to elaborate or clarify what she shared. Including the participant in this stage of the data analysis and verification enhanced her trust of the researcher and ensured that the participant would feel the interview was an accurate representation of her own experiences. The researcher also used this time to follow up on questions that were not fully addressed in the initial interview and seek clarification of areas of uncertainty (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

External validity for the present study was primarily theoretical in nature; the small sample of students in this population prevents generalizability to "other actual contexts," but the participants' experiences were particularly instrumental for considering the kinds of challenges that similar groups of students could face in similar contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The intersectional theoretical framework supports this validity by uncovering the ways that systems of power function to oppress high-achieving Black women undergraduates in their interactions with others in academic and campus life. These same forces were functions of society and may be similarly operative in other social contexts as well.

In the pilot study, students' active status in honors was verified using access to student records from members of the honors college. In order to protect the confidentiality of the students and their choice to participate in the dissertation study, students' information was not verified with the staff in either honors college. Therefore, the researcher had to trust that the respondents provided accurate data regarding their

academic achievement information such as GPA, majors, and good standing in honors at the time of the study.

Positionality

As an administrator at the university, I had a duty to support all of my students' success; but as an educator of color, I was personally committed to advocating for the needs of students whose voices were often unheard and perspectives unconsidered in campus life. My approach to working with students was shaped by my own positionality. As a Black woman, my membership in a variety of social groups – racial, gender, and class, among others – and their historical significance in American society shaped the way I interpreted the world (Collins, 1991, p. 33). As someone that was once an undergraduate navigating a PWI, some of the experiences the women shared in the pilot research, discussed in the literature, and in the dissertation study resonated with my own. As the conceptual origins of the intersectional framework suggested, my standpoint (and that of the women in this study) as a "Black woman intellectual" may not be accessible to outsiders (Collins, 1991, p. 33). My own personal experiences and perspective brought an acute sensitivity to the experiences of this population that aided me in my understanding of nuanced meanings as I collected and analyzed data from student interviews. In this way, I could be viewed as an insider by my participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

It was important that a Black woman helped this population of Black women's voices be heard so that others did not continue to ignore them or speak for them. My physical appearance may have helped with gaining students' trust as they shared their

experiences. As Collins (1991) argues, “it is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of our own oppression than it is for those who live outside those structures" because only we had experienced this particular intersection of oppression (p. 33-34). My rapport with participants was such that there was an unspoken knowing, that unlike a researcher with a different racial or gender identity, they did not need to be the reluctant educator of all things Black culture with me. I understood from my own experiences that was more than one way to be Black or woman or any of the other identities we discussed, despite how some of the social interactions they described sent a message to the contrary. Because of those commonalities, I also took care to maintain an appropriate distance from participants, avoiding acting as a big sister or offering guidance in a way that I often would in my professional role as an academic advisor. By undertaking this dissertation study, I accepted responsibility for aiding high-achieving Black undergraduate women as a group in their self-definition in the higher education research that has historically subordinated them (Collins, 1991, p. 34).

As with any qualitatively oriented study, the researcher as the data collection instrument has to be aware of her biases. Sharing Jordan-Zachery’s (2007) concern about negotiating the blurred “lines between the personal and the intellectual pursuits,” as I conducted this research project, I bracketed my own perspectives, expectations, and experiences in an effort to provide a truthful representation of the voices of the academically talented Black women at the center of this study (p. 258).

Ethical Considerations

In order to respect the privacy of the students and the honors college, the names of the participants and the site were kept confidential. All students were assigned pseudonyms in the transcriptions and dissertation in order to protect their identities. Each participant completed an informed consent form electronically before the background questionnaire and also before the start of the in-person interviews and had have the opportunity not to proceed in the study if they chose. I respected the confidentiality of each participant in the study, keeping any identifying information and their responses private and in a locked storage unit in my home office. Electronic responses were kept in a password-protected file.

As expressed in the previous section, I recognized the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of individual students' participation in the study from the honors college staff. This consideration of anonymity for the students supported their trust in me as a researcher and hopefully encouraged them to feel that they could be open and honest in our interviews. I reviewed the informed consent form with them and also obtained their written consent at the start of the first in-person interview. They kept a copy for their records and so they had contact information for the researcher if needed. They also had the opportunity to do a member check once the interview was transcribed which provided them with an opportunity to ask any questions about the study in person.

The professional staff at Polytech University were receptive to my study, but I was still cognizant of the importance of taking time to build trust with them since I was an outsider and was employed at a neighboring institution with a similar population and may be viewed as a competitor. I viewed my administrative role as a benefit to the study

procedures as well as to the honors college as I had experience working with this population and my pilot study helped me anticipate potential personal and ethical challenges to the research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter addressed the findings from the present study by each research question. Just as the students' identities were intersecting, so too the findings from the two research questions were interconnected. The first section addresses life inside the classroom, including participant interactions with peers and faculty within formal academic settings. The second section discusses experiences in campus life and interactions outside the classroom with peers and others. The final section addresses participant identities and their salience across academic and social contexts. As the students understood their identities through their interactions with others, and their life experiences were colored by the lenses of those identities, this chapter attempts to distill their experiences into an illustration that helps shed light on the triumphs and challenges of college life for the high-achieving Black women undergraduates at the center of this study.

Experiences inside the Classroom

Undergraduates spend much of their time inside the classroom or in spaces associated with their academic disciplines. Participants shared their general perceptions about their classroom environments, particularly about the dynamic of their interactions with classmates and faculty in those spaces. Instructors set the tone in their classroom and have the power to shape the way discussion and other interactions are supported or discouraged in their space. Participants placed high value on their relationships with their

instructors, whether they viewed their connections with them as undesirable or constructive. Some expressed a sense of feeling supported and welcome in their classes or by their academic departments, but many acknowledged significant challenges they faced in the classroom that left them feeling scrutinized.

Classroom Challenges

Despite their status as high-achievers, participants in the study shared that they often measured their class participation. Stereotypical high-achiever behavior assumes that students in this population should be raising their hands and avid contributors in class. Answering questions or discussing the reading are some of the active learning or engagement behaviors that signal to instructors that students are attentive and prepared for class. It is common practice for instructors to include participation as part of the grade for a course. Sometimes the study participants avoided contributing their voices out of a lack of confidence in themselves or their mastery of the material.

Shantel admitted that she listened actively in class but hesitated to raise her hand to add to discussion. "I've always kind of had an issue with speaking in front of people," she confessed. Her affect and body language during her interviews were indicative of such behavior: her slouched posture and avoidance of eye contact came across as unsure and fairly tentative. She measuredly shared her opinions in a tone that seemed awaiting of my approval of her responses. Mia also painted herself as timid in the classroom, choosing not to speak up often and very much aware that she was the "token Black girl" in most of her classes, especially as a nursing major. Aisha was working on being less introverted; despite feeling fine meeting with professors during office hours, she "just can't bring myself to just openly just speak in class" (10: 38). Similarly, Anissa indicated

she often hesitated to speak up, although she often found she knew the correct answer to questions. "I'm very quiet in class, so I don't like to answer questions. Like I'll say the answer in my head, and then someone will raise their hand, and I'll say, 'wow, I got it right'" (6:14). Despite having a solid grasp on the material, she felt intimidated by her smart peers in the classroom.

Other times there were barriers that impeded even the most confident and outspoken students from contributing in the classroom. They mentioned a fear of their thoughts being dismissed or that their comments in discussions would be used to define everyone who shared their identities. Lauryn was confident and generally outspoken, but in her required diversity course she often kept her opinions to herself. She tried to talk to her instructor but kept reflecting on her first impression of him. "At the beginning of the course, he told us he didn't really care about our opinions. So sometimes I didn't really say anything because he obviously didn't, like he really believes in his theory" (Lauryn, 24:14). The instructor positioned himself as the all-knowing authority for his classroom, discouraging students from engaging with him, and perhaps each other, preventing opportunities for debate.

Crystal's professor left little room for students' verbal contributions either. In one of her large general education courses, the professor often asked for class participation, but tended to dominate the air space with his own voice. Instead of speaking up, she sat in the back of the room, listened to the lecture, and completed her assignments. With so many people in the class, there were too many students to get to know them all, especially a student like Crystal who did not speak up.

Amber also chose not to participate in class. Before the semester started she was looking forward to taking her required diversity course and having an opportunity to "interact with other people on their ideas about race" (4:14). Her actual experience with the course turned out to be very different from what she expected. Her professor did not welcome discussion. She also found the course material offensive. One day in class, the instructor played a video of a Dave Chappelle skit which included a blind Black man who had been raised by a white family to hate Black people. The professor gave no introduction to or discussion of the sketch.

> And she played the movie and just kind of like went to the back and just sat there. And I remember everyone laughing and thinking the video was funny. And it just didn't sit right with me. I don't know. It was just not comfortable. That was a really uncomfortable moment for me. It was just really surprising. We didn't talk about it as a class. She just played it, and then went to the next video. And it was always something that was weird to me. So I was very aware I was Black in that moment. (Amber 4:14).

In a course focused on enhancing students' understanding and appreciation of diversity, the instructor's failure to engage students in conversations, particularly around such provocative material, made the environment uncomfortable.

In the examples above, the instructor's teaching style and approach to student interactions failed to produce a welcoming and inviting classroom environment. The participants' descriptions of their professors' behavior were alienating, especially for students who felt more comfortable engaging material with their instructor one to one instead of in a formal classroom discussion, like many of those in the study.

Spotlighting

Another challenge students faced in academic spaces was the negative, unwanted attention in the classroom on their voices, bodies, or experiences as members of their

social groups. All 13 of the students at Atlantic University alluded to a spotlighting situation in the classroom during their time at college, even the first-year students. The finding in the present study was consistent with the same theme in Winkle-Wagner's (2009) research on undergraduate Black women. As in her study, spotlighting led to an expectation that students under the microscope should be the representative for their identity groups and the default educator for their majority others. This spotlighting was particularly common during discussions of race.

Professors and students alike played a part in the spotlighting the participants in the study. Anissa felt that her instructors "narrow in on me, and they're like, 'okay, this girl, maybe she actually *is* really smart'" (6:36). She was self-conscious and sensed judgement from her professors based on the way she looks and how she stands out in her classroom as the only Black person. Because of this attention and her sense of how the instructors viewed her, she felt she had to "prove myself in a way. So that's why I study so hard for my tests: because I want them to know I'm much more than just what they see" (6:36). She wanted her academic performance to be why her instructors paid her attention, not her skin color.

Jacqueline described a testy situation in one of her required honors humanities courses. As in many of her other honors classes, she was the only Black woman in the classroom. She acknowledged that her instructor was well-intentioned with his solicitation of a variety of student voices into class discussions, but when he put her on the spot as the default expert on Black life in the classroom she felt he floundered an opportunity to make the assigned readings on African American experiences constructive for everyone, herself included (21:5). Although Jacqueline sometimes felt inclined to

share her experiences to add a different perspective to discussions, this unwanted attention by her professor made her feel uncomfortable.

Aisha and Mia had a similar experience in their required humanities course. One day the instructor began the class with a broad question: "what is an African American and how you describe that?" The question was completely unrelated to the class texts. Their classmates' reaction: everyone turned to look at Mia and Aisha at their end of the long conference table, waiting for them to respond. They remained silent. Their classmates kept looking. What transpired in Aisha and Mia's classroom exposed the role peers can play in shaping classroom context, not just the faculty member.

Classmates were also active in the spotlighting of study participants, giving them unwanted negative attention in class because of some aspect of their identity. Often students were expected to be the spokesperson for their entire racial communities. Keshia was a sophomore health professions student at Atlantic. In her experience, "When there's topics that come up with race or things, sometimes people look at me like I completely understand like the whole Black community, and I have no clue" (22:10). Mia shared those sentiments. "I don't feel like I have to speak on behalf of the entire Black community, but people always expect me to. So that's kind of hard in the classroom" (26:12). Miranda also felt the pressure of being under the microscope. "In the classroom, I often feel that when I speak up or disagree, my entire identity is under scrutiny. That's to say that I'm representing all people of color, or more specifically all women of color, with any comments I make" (22:32). Classrooms should be spaces where dissent is welcome, not where students with smart ideas feel discouraged to contribute.

Even on topics outside of race they were scrutinized. As a student-athlete, Amber acknowledged her sensitivity to how people reacted to athletes on campus. To evade unwanted attention, she avoided wearing her athletic attire to class. After missing class for a student-athlete career development program, she approached her professor before class to excuse her absence and learn more about what she missed from the lecture. Despite attempting to communicate with her instructor discretely, "three people whipped their heads around and are like, 'oh, you're a student-athlete!'" Their exclaim alerted everyone in the room. Amber felt outed.

Anissa was also conscious of her classmates' scrutiny. She was most confident about her calculus skills, having taken it in high school. But she found that her classmates seemed surprised by her abilities. "So it's interesting to see when I answer question in calc class how people kind of like – you can see like this slight turn of a head," she said. She had the sense that her participation was unwelcome by her peers. She felt they judged her based on what she looked like without even knowing anything about her. After being spotlighted, students felt anger, frustration, self-doubt, and tokenized: emotional challenges their other peers did not have to surmount. They also felt self-conscious about speaking up at all.

The pressures that peers and professors placed on the participants inside the classroom were detrimental to student learning. It was unproductive and unjust for high-achieving Black women to have to expend intellectual and emotional energy defending themselves from unwanted attention. Although it was clear their tokenized presence in the classroom situated them as the default educators for their peers and professors, high-achieving Black women are not at college with the purpose of informing others about

their life experiences or as the representatives for their social groups. As individuals grouped together by society solely based on their skin color, the reality of the students in this study's everyday lives was that their experiences and backgrounds may not be common or at all reflective of the racial or ethnic communities to which they are assigned. Many of the participants acknowledged not feeling deeply immersed in the "Black experience" or what they sensed their racial majority peers assumed of them. As intersectional beings with varying social class, family nationality, sexual orientation, and other identities, a number of the students struggled with how they fit in or not with how society expected them to perform as racialized beings. More discussion of the salience of the participants' racial identities is later in this chapter.

Avoiding the Spotlight

To avoid being spotlighted or unwillingly being labeled the representative for her various identity communities, some of the students described themselves as hiding in plain sight in the classroom. For those who perceived the classroom as a hostile space, raising their hand was an act that drew even more unwanted attention and pressure. Some avoided the gaze of their peers by purposely exhibiting behaviors that made them less visible.

"I try to make myself invisible... It just happens in some way," Shantel said. "I like to wear black... I have a lot of dark clothes. I mean, that doesn't necessarily make me invisible, but I feel like people avoid me then" (Shantel 30:12). Shantel did not want to draw any unnecessary attention to herself. Aisha avoided eye contact with her peers and instructors, particularly when she did not want to become the default contributor to conversations about race. The best way to avoid becoming the center of unwanted attention was to be unseen.

Self-Preservation and Protection. Some of the participants chose silence as an emotional defense mechanism. Jacqueline felt that it was hard to recover the confidence to participate in class after being spotlighted. "It's hard, and I probably lost a lot of participation points in my humanities classes just because I couldn't figure out how to participate, especially after instances of such tension" (20:9). She feared that she might face the same treatment in other instances.

On more than one occasion, Miranda had been on the receiving end of class discussion that objectified people of color. When she did choose to speak up about the sweeping generalizations her classmates made about the university's low income neighborhood or other social issues, she felt that her opinions were not valued. Silence was safer.

> I feel like if I really vocalized every single time someone said something in class, even a professor that was just questionable, I would be fighting a lot. And I don't mean fighting in the sense that I'm being loud and being aggressive, but really just getting into arguments with people because of some of the things that they say. So sometimes for my own personal well-being, I have to just bite my tongue and say they don't know any better (Miranda 22:12).

Although she often felt defensive of her own community, she realized that it was not her job to serve as the representative to foster her peers' awareness. Silence was self-preservation.

Precollege Classrooms. Unfortunately, an unsupportive classroom was not a new phenomenon for a number of the participants. Issues with silencing and visibility were present in their high school learning environments as well. At her rural public high school, Miranda often felt that adding her voice to classroom discussion would "lack credibility" because she was not part of the dominant social or academic group of

students whose voices were privileged in those spaces. They cut her off in class. They ignored her. Being dismissed by her peers led to academic self-doubt, preventing her from confidently contributing until her later years in school. "It was like anything I said, [when] I raised my hand, if it wasn't the smartest thing in the world it was immediately kinda just brushed off" (23:2). Aisha and Keshia echoed this sentiment, citing similar situations in their small town high schools as well. Their experiences illustrated that the challenges high-achieving Black women faced in the classroom at college were not uncommon: the students had to overcome obstacles to success earlier in their academic experience as well.

Jacqueline and Miranda's sentiments were an indicator that study participants were not avoiding participation out of lack of interest or knowledge. The hostility of their classroom environments reflected the systemic issues affecting their social groups in society. Their "choice" to not participate was an act of self-preservation within a system that limited their agency. And in the instances they chose to speak up despite those barriers, their participation was an act of resistance.

Participation in Class

As they strategically measured their participation, students chose other methods to assert their engagement with the material and send their instructors the message that they were engaged in the course. Despite her anxiety around participating in class discussions, Shantel tried to make it a point to let her professors "know that I'm engaged and that I'm listening and that I'm there" (8:6). She stayed after class to talk with the ones she was closer with. Anissa was quiet in nature and preferred to connect with her faculty during

office hours. Although she found it awkward and sometimes struggled to know what to do there, she would go ask questions so they could get to know her.

Mia admitted that she tried to speak up sometimes. "But it takes me a while to build up the courage to raise my hand a lot. If I need something, if I have questions, then I'm comfortable going up to my professors after class and asking them or sending them an email if I need to" (Mia 26:13). For Mia, the classroom environment posed the obstacle not the communication with the instructor. More examples of how the students described their constructive interactions with professors are further discussed later in the section.

Students were intentional about ensuring their instructors knew that they were prepared for class and well-versed in the material. Some participants valued these connections because of their intent to request references later in their academic careers, noting that if their instructors liked them and knew their names they would be more apt to support their candidacy for future opportunities. Others simply went through the motions of performing the student behaviors that suggested they were active or engaged learners because they knew it would positively impact their grade. Regardless of their motivation or the sometimes challenging conditions they faced, maintaining a relationship with their instructors was important to them, whether they nurtured those connections during, after or outside of class.

In the situations described in this section, just a couple of questions or comments made the classroom feel tense, hostile, and unwelcoming. At all universities, some professors are better at moderating discussion of sensitive topics than others. Likewise, students' skill level for constructively engaging those topics varies. Instead of being one

individual student among a room of capable learners, the participants - who were already very sensitive to their minoritized status - were forced into scrutiny. Not all people of color or women or high-achieving students have the same experiences, but being the only one who looked like them in their classrooms tokenized them. Regardless of their intention, unwanted critical attention from classmates and instructors can have an intense negative impact on how high-achieving Black women perceive the tone of their learning space. No student should be under such stressful scrutiny while trying to earn an education.

Classroom Supports

Despite the numerous challenges they described about some of their interactions in the classroom, participants did have constructive experiences to share. As discussed in the previous section, students were particularly attentive to the nature of interactions with their faculty members.

Despite the pressure she felt to perform in her highly competitive nursing program, Keshia made connections with a couple of her instructors early in her college career. She expressed her appreciation for one who had written her a letter of recommendation. The other, her clinical instructor, she described as a role model: like Keshia, she beat the odds to pursue higher education. Despite numerous obligations in her personal life, her clinical instructor had persevered to pursue her masters in nursing education and was modeling the way for her students to be successful.

> I think it's nice to know them on a personal level, because they want us to succeed, as much as we don't think they do. But it just helps me to do better in classes. I can email them, like I don't understand something or that they can ask me 'can you tutor somebody' or just something like that. (Keshia 14:19)

Shannon also had favorable impressions of her professors. As a senior STEM major at Polytech, she recognized the importance of their relationships. "In the classroom, it's always a big deal for me to always make a really good impression on my professors," Shannon noted. As one of the only women and students of color in her white male dominated STEM major, she felt that her ability to demonstrate to her instructors early on that she was "high-achieving and smart" helped ensure that she would be considered when opportunities arose. Her impressive resume filled with internships, co-ops, and shadowing experience were strong support for her argument. "I've received emails, and it's so nice because they're like, 'This made me think of you. You should apply.' So in the context of the classroom, I really try to put forward my best foot; I try not to fall asleep in class; I try to be really good, like really get those good grades." Although she admitted to sometimes dozing off in one of her early classes, her close relationship with that instructor allowed her access to his network of colleagues and professional opportunities. Anissa also felt the need to behave a particular way to manage her professor's perception of her. Her instructor in one of her large science classes did not know her very well, but she felt pressure not to ever miss class because as the only Black person in her classroom, her absence would be obvious. She acknowledged the pressure to perform academic behaviors in a way that would not reflect poorly on her or others that look like her.

Serena had a professor at Atlantic who encouraged her beyond the course requirements. For one of her papers in her required diversity course she reflected on her identities as Nigerian American and Black and female and found that the professor took an interest in her experiences. "So, she was always kind. She always talked to me about

things like this and always wanted me to expand on that… she would give me materials on this and [kind of] we would always talk back and forth about the issues that I brought up in that paper" (Serena 4:8). Her professor made her feel like her background and experiences mattered and helped make her experience in that particular classroom constructive and supportive.

Grace felt supported and welcomed and liked her professors. She generally described them as very knowledgeable and friendly. Since her major was a fairly small intellectual community at Polytech, she anticipated she would get to know them quite well before graduating. She felt good about being able to approach them if she needed help with her coursework, but she was still shy about spending time at their office hours or talking to them outside of class.

Miranda felt that her professors were very good overall, particularly in her honors courses.

> I have had nothing but good experiences with my upper levels. I feel like the professors are always great. They're small classes. People are engaged. We talk about real substantive issues, and no one's just trying to sound good. Everyone's genuinely trying to understand what's going on and learn from it. So those classmates, my honors classmates are great (Miranda 22:9).

Michelle was generally positive about her classroom experience. She felt that her honors peers provided "lots of different perspectives" in class. She was particularly happy about her instructor's diverse course readings in her diversity class. The inclusion of works from multicultural authors on a variety of social issues was in stark contrast to her STEM major and other classes that touched on race.

> In other classes I had where we talked about race it was always an upper-class white person talking about how they perceived race. And a lot of

> these books were either written by... one was written by a Latin American woman, a couple were written by Black authors, and they gave a well-rounded understanding of how race is a very political thing in America and how it actually affects different kinds of people. (Michelle 2:3)

Students described their relationships with their instructors as a major part of their academic experience. When instructors and academic departments were supportive, it fostered positive learning environments for the study participants. This finding was consistent with research in higher education that examined the importance of student-faculty interactions (Pascarella, 1980; Umbach & Wawryznski, 2005) and their varying impact based on students' gender and other identities (Sax, Byrant & Harper, 2005). Patton & Croom (2017) argued the particular importance of those environments and interactions for undergraduate Black women. Donovan and Guillory (2017) examined the influence of sociocultural stressors on these students. And Shaw (2017) analyzed how the students in this population were able to "struggle successfully." This recent literature reiterated the significance of interactions with faculty and the tone of campus learning environments for student outcomes.

Analysis of Classroom Experiences

Academic spaces on campus posed challenges and supports for the participants in the study. Students shared that their individual interactions with faculty and smaller honors courses were mostly constructive and supportive academic experiences. In contrast, many classroom or academic contexts were not. Participants often depicted their classrooms as inhospitable. Spotlighting and other negative interactions in academic spaces posed a major threat to the success of high-achieving Black women in the classroom. For better or worse, students keenly exercised self-preservation in the form of

silence to successfully navigate those academic spaces. The students acknowledged the importance of the professor's role in creating a safe space to engage with others or their reinforcement of a hostile environment. They also addressed the how their peers contributed to the tone of the learning environment. Despite their intellectual ability to excel in the class, the conditions under which the high-achieving Black women in the study struggled to succeed were unjust. Chapter Five will discuss the implications of these findings and provides recommendations for faculty and universities to enhance the classroom experience for high-achieving Black women and students with other diverse backgrounds.

Experiences outside the Classroom

The nature of the study participants' experiences in the classroom were echoed in their social interactions. The section that follows examines participants' experiences at college in non-classroom environments with peers and friends. There is a discussion of interactions in formal and informal student activities that shed light on life outside the classroom for high-achieving Black women at urban predominantly white institutions (PWIs).

Student Involvement

Outside of organized activities, the study participants described themselves like other traditional modern college students: studying for class, spending time on social media, watching Netflix with friends, exploring their urban locale, going to concerts, and eating or relaxing with friends. They were also involved in a wide range of organized campus life activities. They described themselves as peer mentors, sorority members, admissions

ambassadors, dance troupe performers, singers, musicians, Christian youth fellowship members, or mentors for local school children. A number of them held significant leadership roles in those groups as well. Shannon and Nicole were organization presidents, while many participants were on the executive teams of their groups, and others were active members of orgs across their university. A few were involved in philanthropic and service groups, and a number of participants attended meetings for their professional or career affiliations.

Most of the students were in at least one group that reflected some aspect of their multifaceted identities, including ethnicity, race, academic major or excellence, gender, or political preference. Amber and Shannon participated with the Caribbean associations at their universities. Amber was also a Division I student-athlete. Aisha and Serena were part of the campus ministry, while Anissa attended a church near campus. Grace was in the choir and a music ensemble. Keshia, Miranda, and Shannon were sorority women. Mia, Michelle, and Zoe participated in service and philanthropy groups. Jacqueline, Lauryn, and Nicole committed their time to women's advocacy and empowerment groups. About two-thirds of the students were involved in pre-professional affiliation groups. Participants acknowledged the connections between their various identities and their involvement during interviews, which is the subject of the second research question and addressed in the final section of the chapter.

Only a handful of the students were in just one organization. Amber's athletic team commitments precluded her from participating in student activities regularly, but she enjoyed attending the Caribbean Association meetings and events when she was able. Crystal's involvement was also limited. She spent most of her time focused on

studying, doing homework or with her boyfriend. She was only a member of the Association of Computer Machinery Women. She said she did not make friends easily, and though she made some connections at the end of the semester that she anticipated would help her get more involved the next year, she was generally disconnected from campus life. Both Amber and Crystal expressed the desire to be more involved, particularly in initiatives for students of color in honors, and generally in the campus community.

Employment and Commitments

Shantel was not involved with any campus orgs and was the only participant without connections to student life. Shantel resided locally in her family's home and commuted to campus. Her demanding employment schedule that helped her cover costs for college was an obstacle to her involvement. "If I'm not in class, I'm probably at work," she said. "I pretty much work…" (Shantel 30:19). She generally worked about 23 hours per week at a food truck near campus. "The way my schedule is, I have like an hour between class and work, and I usually just go right to work and talk to my coworkers and stuff" (Shantel 30:19). With her hours often conflicting with evening org meetings, and needing to make time to study, Shantel did not have much extra time for social activities. She felt a strong sense of community with her coworkers more than her campus.

Other employed students balanced working with hearty social involvement. Shannon worked during every year of college; in her senior year, while interning and taking fewer credits, she had two jobs. She worked on campus at Polytech as a help desk assistant, which was a good fit for her future career in information technology. She also

worked part-time at a local coffee shop working about 20 hours per week. She was saving her money for a down payment on an apartment for the following year when she would start her career in another city. Since her first year she was an active member of a women in science organization and her sorority, adding chapter president to her responsibilities in her senior year.

Nicole worked in the university student center for about 15 hours per week. She was very active in campus life as well, serving as the president of the Black business student group and a member of a Black women's empowerment group at Atlantic. She was also a mentee in an external organization for future industry leaders. Miranda waited tables on the weekends, saving money to help support herself while at school. She was also an active volunteer, peer mentor, and leader in her sorority and debate team.

Each of the employed participants, and those who did not have jobs, indicated that her parents or university scholarships were covering much of the financial costs associated with their college attendance. Although Shantel, Nicole, Shannon and Miranda needed to work in order to afford their college experience, each was proud of her ability to subsidize what her parents contributed. Miranda enjoyed being a server so she could take her pay from each night and "pay for my utilities, my phone bill, my groceries, and transportation" (Miranda 22:3). Shannon was also able to fund most of her own non-tuition expenses and did not ask her parents for money. She had a number of paid internships during college. "When I was working, I was getting paid enough that I never had to ask them for money," Shannon said. "I went abroad a couple times. They never had to pay for my flights or my lodging, nothing like that" (28:10). With the

exception of Shantel, working did not get in the way of their involvement in campus life; they managed to give time to both.

Similar to their experiences inside the classroom, participants in the study were othered in their interactions outside the classroom. In social spaces, participants acknowledged feeling like "the only one" and serving as the educator on all things Black culture. They shared a number of microaggressions from their peers. In contrast, participants also shared a number of constructive experiences from their social interactions including making friends in their living environments, leadership opportunities, and surrounding themselves with people to support them.

Challenges outside the Classroom

Feeling Different

At a PWI, it was not uncommon for participants to be the only one in a space outside the classroom. Although not all of the participants described themselves as constantly aware of their differences from their peers, most shared situations in which they felt sensitive to those differences. Michelle was aware of her racial difference from her peers in her professional organization.

> When I look at the people in the org [also], there's not as many people that look like me. There's still some, which is nice, but I feel like I have to...I don't know. I feel like I'm representing all the other people, all the other Blacks or minorities in general, who want to be speech pathologists but aren't in the group or not here (Michelle 20:33).

Michelle sensed that she was the representative for her identity groups in that social space because there were so few like her.

Miranda experienced being the only one on an organizational level. She was keenly aware of her team's othered status among the elite universities at tournaments for

her debate league. Most teams were all white and male from private colleges, in contrast to Atlantic, which was public and had a few minority members. When Atlantic first started in the league, "...I think there were some barriers to entry, for some obvious reasons," Miranda said, alluding to the status and racial discrepancies (23:10).

> It was really just tough for people and we had a low retention rate because people just didn't feel comfortable at tournaments. I've even talked to one of my friends here, Deepthi. She used to debate in high school and she said the reason she doesn't do it now is because of those kinds of dynamics (Miranda 23:10).

Miranda and her friend described that environment as tiring. Deepthi chose not to continue, but Miranda stuck with it. "The debate is dominated by white men and it was tiring and she had no interest in doing it again," Miranda reasoned. "So we lose people a lot because of that" (23:10). Feeling uncomfortably different was a common challenge for the participants in the study.

In her predominantly white sport, Amber was the only Black athlete on her team. As the only one, she was sensitive to how others associated her abilities with her race instead of her talent. "So obviously there's a stigma, like I jump higher, blah, blah, blah, run faster - which I do," Amber said. "But, you know, there are things where it's like, I don't want that to just be the only reason why I am able to have that sort of athletic ability. I work just as hard as everyone else" (4:40). Amber disliked that others assumed she only performed well on the court because she was Black. Not all Black people were naturally good athletes: she disliked being reduced to a stereotype.

Nicole was the only one in many of her social spaces, so she was particularly aware when she was not, and so were some of her white peers. The presidents of some of the business organizations were all in the office at the same time, each representing a

different background: one African American, one Chinese, one Middle Eastern, and one white American. "So he was like, 'I'm the only white guy in the room.' And me and this other [one] are like 'yeah, well like try being us... This happens all the time'" (Nicole 24:47). Nicole hoped that experience showed him how it feels to be the only one, but reasoned that "if I went around pointing that out all the time, ['cause it's like] I'd be saying it a lot, you know?" (24:47). Outside of the multicultural community she created for herself and the multicultural groups she belonged to, it was different for the roles to be reversed.

Amber was also sensitive to the difference when she was not the only one in campus spaces. Like many of the other participants, Amber was conscious of the lack of people who looked like her in her classes, so she was happy to see so many students of color emerge on her campus quad once the weather was nice.

> You know the fraternities and sororities have events at the quad, and I go. And it's kinda of like, where are all these Black women - and not just Black women, Black *people* on campus? I didn't know there were that many Black women that went to school here. (Amber 5:3).

For the participants who were not immersed in multicultural communities at college, encountering a concentration of students who shared their racial and gender identities was surprising. Crystal referred to that community as "Black Atlantic," suggesting that there was an underground group of students she did not know how to access. She described the quad emergence as if she had missed the memo for all the Black students, unsure where to find others who looked like her until she made a connection with someone else who did. Crystal hoped her new roommates for the next year, other Black women she stumbled upon on Facebook, would help facilitate that connection.

Anissa also longed for that connection. Faced with the possibility of being the only person of color in most of the sorority houses she visited on rush night, she was concerned about whether she would find an organization that would make her feel comfortable and welcome. She hoped to get connected with more Black women on campus at Polytech. "But apparently they do have Black sororities. I don't know where, but apparently they do. So maybe I'll join one of those" (Anissa 6:43). As a freshman, she was in the process of figuring out where she fit in campus life. As her experience illustrates, being the only one mattered in her navigation of social spaces. On the other hand, because of the unique intersections of her cultural and racial identities in particular, she was also concerned about navigating a community of all Black women as well. She said she hated to make it about race, but she would often "feel like I'm too Black for the white people and too white for [Black] people" (6:43). Even among peers who shared some of her identities she still felt like the only one.

The residence halls were a common space where students felt like the only one. Crystal, Aisha, Mia, Serena and Anissa all noticed they were among very few Black people in their hall, particularly on their floors or in the honors spaces. "I was the only Black person in my entire hallway which I thought was like crazy," Crystal said (8:48). Coming from a high school where there were more Black people, at Atlantic she felt very isolated, disconnected, and "lonesome." Crystal also felt weird around the other Black honors students she did meet who went to high school where they were used to being the only one. "They don't feel why I'm uncomfortable [either]. So it's... it's a strange dynamic at Atlantic" (8:48). The university and residential culture were uncomfortable.

Aisha and Mia also noticed they were the only ones in their hall at Atlantic. "I think there's only one other Black person in my hall. I just noticed that recently," Mia reflected (18:23). "I thought that was kind of weird" (18:23). Serena recalled "maybe two other Black girls that I remember seeing around" when she lived on the honors floor, but did not have any interactions with them (26:19). In the present year, she felt it was "cool finally having someone that had the same experience, well similar experiences and similar struggles that I had" as her roommate (26:19). She was happy to have a roommate who shared more than just her gender and academic identities. She was also happy to be living on a more ethnically diverse floor, although she admitted her floormates mostly kept to themselves.

Living among honors students was a challenge and a support for Anissa. She appreciated that they were all focused on doing well in their academics; the problem was that her predominantly Indian hallmates ostracized her for spending time with other Black students instead of just them. One night while she was studying, she declined an invitation to hang out at an Indian fraternity house because she planned to spend time with other friends when she was done with her work. "And they're like, 'oh, your African friends,'" which she reiterated was not the only reason they were friends (Anissa 6:46). As the only Black woman among her friend group on her floor, she felt sensitive about how race mattered in her interactions with them. "I have friends from all different races, like why does it matter, you know?" (Anissa 6:46). For each of these students, their living environment was a place where they were othered.

Microaggressions

Some of the experiences the study participants shared made it clear that it was not simply their self-perception that gave them the sense they were unwelcome in social contexts: their peers made comments or gestures that incurred their concern. These microaggressions - both the threat of them and their occurrence - played a role in how students navigated campus life. A number of the participants who experienced these sometimes subtle putdowns or insults about their identities had experienced similar critical comments in prior predominantly white schooling environments. But knowing the threat did not change the irritation or insult the women felt about the comments or gestures directed at them.

Some situations were minor concerns and easily disregarded while others were more serious. Aisha shared about an experience with her campus ministry group during a potluck event. Her friends encouraged her to play some Nigerian music while they were socializing, so she approached the person managing the playlist. When she told him the song, he wanted to know what it was, and when she explained, he leaned over to his friend and audibly scoffed at her wanting to play Nigerian music. "I was like, 'Yeah is that a problem?' ...He played it anyway, but I just didn't know how to feel about that. It's just made me very self-conscious about me being Nigerian" (Aisha 3:15). In that particular interaction, Aisha's nationality was a sensitive identity in the context of her Christian community.

There were a number of situations that made students feel sensitive about their identity. Anissa's Indian friends from her floor pointed out every Black man they encountered on campus and calling him her "future husband" (Anissa 6:47). Serena's

friends made race jokes on occasion or insensitive comments about social issues that related to her identity groups. She was particularly bothered that a friend often commented that she's "so dark in the picture" when they would take group photos (Serena 26:42). Keshia's sorority sisters said they can "always remember your name, because you're one of the four Black girls," narrowing her down to the color of her skin (Keshia 14:53). In her freshman year, one of Jacqueline's white floormates in the honors hall would joke that he and their friends would "just take Jacqueline when we go out" so they would be protected (12:33). He insinuated that she would help them look less out of place in their urban locale. Her retort was that "I don't want to be your token Black friend, you know, keep you from getting shot by the locals" (Jacqueline 12:33). She was very upset by his comment and told him it was offensive. The same friend also pressured Jacqueline into "saying something Black" one night at the residence hall (12:14). When she refused, he kept her from leaving the room. She locked herself in her friend's bathroom to avoid him, and eventually gave in, yelling "fuck the police" to be released (Jacqueline 12:14). To prevent any other uncomfortable situations, she decided not to be friends with him anymore.

It was also common for people to touch the students' hair, or try to, without their consent. Sensitivity was relative about this issue, however. When trying to explain Black cultural practices to her peers, Jacqueline was alright with people touching her hair. Aisha was as well, noting that people were usually just curious. She had a friend from a small town whom she knew had never been near many people of color. So despite not wanting her to touch it, Aisha did not protest; she did remain sensitive to the gesture despite her inaction.

> I'm a little bit insecure about my hair. So the whole curiousness about it and people just touching it and just asking questions about it, I'm like, can't we just pretend it's just hair, you know? Hair is hair. It's just the thing on my head. It's not something to just look at and observe, you know? (Aisha 2:41).

Students in the study cited hair as a common point of education with peers. The women felt they had to explain it to friends or acquaintances because they were innocently ignorant or very nice about their interest in learning more. But silently complying forced students to be the source of all information on Black hair.

The problem in all of these situations is that not all of the Black people on campus know each other or want to be in an intimate relationship simply because of shared racial identity. Not all Black people have the same hair texture or skin tone. Not all Black people speak like rap artists or are from rough neighborhoods. Despite having the opportunity to get to know them as people, peers chose to narrow them down to their race. The people in this study, and others who share their racial identity, are more than just their outward appearance. All students deserve the opportunity to participate in a welcoming campus environment.

Supports outside the Classroom

In contrast to the challenges students faced in campus life, they also had a number of constructive experiences. Some study participants made social connections, did meaningful service, and developed a sense of community at college.

Feeling Welcome

After only a few weeks on campus, Anissa felt very comfortable with her friends from the African Student Association. " … I don't have to even pretend at all," she said of her African friends. "I can just be myself, and I'm just there. They talk and it's like

they're smart too, they know what I'm feeling, they know what we're going through. I have a commonality between them" (Anissa 6:37). She was enjoying the friend group she was building based on their common heritage. Anissa lived in the honors community with other freshmen and felt very close with them from the beginning as well. She and her friends from her floor frequented the dining hall together and encouraged each other to study. She liked that everyone was open to doing things with anyone on the floor and they were not cliquish.

Michelle also felt connected to the members of the organizations she joined. The Black organization for community service at Atlantic gave her opportunities to get to know other members. "I'm closest with the people in the [organization]. I feel like we do more as an org, I guess because we're smaller and hang out at the president's apartment or something like that. And when we go to community events like we'll all travel together" (Michelle 21:3). Bonding with her peers while giving back to the local community helped her build a network of close friends. Jacqueline and Miranda volunteered their time on campus as part of a peer mentoring program. They were trained to help first-year students navigate the transition to college, pick their courses, and find support resources.

Crystal only belonged to one organization: a professional association which provided opportunities for women in the computing field. Compared to other environments on campus, she was one of many minority people at those gatherings. "...Most of them are like Indian or Asian or things like that, so it, it's more inclusive and representative. So I, I just feel like [a] girl in the group rather than the Black girl in the group there, so I like it there" (Crystal 8:47). Crystal was especially

impressed that the events offered by her college featured diverse voices. "...You know, that never happens… but, unless it's a plan, planned thing. So not only were they women, but they were Black" (9:15). She had grown accustomed to being the only one in so many spaces, and was pleasantly surprised and excited about a recent women in technology panel discussion. "It was very insightful," Crystal added. "And I guess they were doing well, and the one girl, she was like 'you'll be fine'" (9:15). Getting to see people who looked like her and being encouraged by them made Crystal feel more confident about her future professional plans.

Being in a sorority helped Shannon and Keshia "feel at home" at college. Shannon joined in her first semester at Polytech and remained active in her chapter throughout college, becoming president in her senior year. Being a sorority woman provided her with leadership experience she felt would help her in her career. Keshia enjoyed cooking with her friends and trying new restaurants in their city. After joining her sorority at Atlantic, she noted she was "starting to feel at home with certain girls. And there I'm really, I could be myself with them" (Keshia 14:26). Connecting with other women was common in Crystal, Shannon and Keshia's involvement in organized activities in campus life. For each of the students, finding the spaces on campus where they felt they shared common identities, academic or social interests helped them feel welcome and contributive to student life at her university. For Black undergraduate women, that sense of connection with a community is what fosters their retention, satisfaction, and ability to attain their goals at the university and beyond.

Analysis of the participants' experiences outside the classroom indicated that much of their time was spent in their living environment or in the context of student

organization gatherings. There were some constructive reflections on their time in the halls, but many participants shared about the memorable challenges they experienced in that context. The microaggressions and othering they described drew attention to the ways systemic social issues manifest in campus life. Even in honors residential communities, the participants indicated consciously recognizing they were "the only one" and how that played a role in their perceptions of their living space as well as how others interacted with them.

In their organizations, being the only one was also a point of concern. To find a community among their predominantly white peers, the students associated themselves with groups that celebrated and acknowledged their identities. From nationality to gender, and identity groups in between, most of the students were immersed in campus life.

The narratives of the study participants were indicative of some of the conditions that other students of color face and that high-achieving undergraduate Black women who attend PWIs may encounter at their own university. Existing research echoed these findings more broadly for students of color. Engaging with majority peers was challenging when interactions may be tinged with racism (Swim et al, 2003; Solórzano et al, 2000; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Students felt unwelcome and isolated from their peers of color at college (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000). The experiences of this group of were consistent with some of the experiences described in extant research on students sharing some of their identities.

Analysis of Experiences

In some instances, participants described life inside and outside the classroom as constructive and supportive, while in many other instances they acknowledged those same spaces and interactions as also challenging. Peers and instructors put study participants in the spotlight in the classroom. Outside the classroom, in what should be their home away from home, they often felt othered. Over time, microaggressions build up. Trying to learn and develop in what some perceived were unsupportive academic and social environments can make students more sensitive about their identities and impact their well-being. As Steele (2010) argued, "...social identities can strongly affect things as important as our performances in the classroom and on standardized tests, our memory capacity, our athletic performance, the pressure we feel to prove ourselves, even the comfort level we have with people of different groups" (p. 4). Without the option to remove themselves from hostile academic spaces, or to avoid all of the threatening social interactions, the students in the study managed to persist toward their personal and professional goals despite those challenges. What are colleges doing to help students like the ones in this study remain successful? How are they helping them feel safe and welcome in campus life?

As an honors educator and a researcher-practitioner, there were clear areas of application of the findings from this study to develop support strategies. In particular, active and intentional recruitment of students of color to join honors would further diversify the academic and social aspects of the honors experience. Students' concern about being the only one and feeling different in the classroom would be alleviated by the presence of more underrepresented students in those spaces. Those students would also

illustrate the diversity of backgrounds and experiences among students of color to white peers in the program. Study participants suggested targeting recruitment efforts toward high-achieving students at their own alma maters and at schools with high student of color populations. Honors can also recruit undergraduates from among its own university, encouraging minoritized students - particularly those in student organizations - to apply for admission.

Inside and outside the classroom, the experiences of the study participants illustrated that although high-achieving Black women gained access to the intellectual and social spaces at their PWIs, in many cases they did not feel accepted within them. Students often sought community among those with similar backgrounds to help them navigate the rough waters of their PWI. Institutions needed to do better at enhancing conditions to help the academically talented Black women like those in this study live fully academically and socially at college.

Salience of Identities

Students navigated college life within a variety of contexts. While reflecting on their experiences, they revealed their perceptions about how much their complex identities mattered in different environments. As Stewart (2009) argued, “identity salience cannot be ignored when discussing the interaction of multiple facets of identity" (p. 255). Although there were instances where the students felt particularly strong about a single one of their identities, overall their self-descriptions reinforced the often inextricable nature of their identities as people who lived at the intersections. The section that follows

examines the salience of the participants' identities in various contexts and the nature of their interactions with different kinds of people during college.

Race x Gender x Academic Identity

Each participant explained what it meant to have membership in identity groups that mattered to her. A few were able to describe the various aspects of those identities in separate pieces, noting situations when they felt particularly Black or intensely aware they were female. Through the stories they shared about feeling sensitive to those identities, however, it was clear that they were collectively living at the nexus of more than one of those identities simultaneously. Their strongest expressions of self were the combination of race x gender x academic identities.

As Black women high-achievers, they felt pressured to be more successful than others who shared some of their identities. Compared to their peers from home, they shared how their attendance at college meant they had beaten the odds. They were doing better than people they grew up with who were unable to make it out of their environment. "Well, I defied all odds," said Keshia, who described herself as a smart, high-achieving Black woman. She held up her fingers and counted off family and friends who had not made it.

> It was just a thing. Like they were fighting, they were in jail, they were into drugs, [and] they went to prison. And so to finally be here and have my family behind me supporting me, super proud they can say, "Yeah, my daughter is at Atlantic. She's a nursing student." It just makes me feel great (Keshia 14:23).

Being successful as a Black woman was a big part of how Keshia defined herself.

Michelle felt similarly about her identities, describing herself as a high-achieving and academically talented Black woman. She said that being those identities made her

feel that "if I am going to be a Black girl in college, I want to be one of the best Black girls in college" (20:34). She was particularly aware of what was at stake because she had learned about dropout statistics as part of a peer mentoring class. "I don't want to be one of those statistics, even though it's fine if you are: things happen. But I feel like I have to work hard to battle the things that are against me kind of. Like the numbers are literally against me for being here" (Michelle 20:34). She did not want to be one of the capable Black women who did not make it.

Anissa, Aisha and Serena's families made them feel pressured as well. As the daughters of immigrants, they shared their parents' expectation that they needed to be successful and to make the most of opportunities in America that others did not have. For their West African families, excellence in school was paramount.

Defying Stereotypes

Participants also felt pressure to counter a number of stereotypes about Black women's achievement. Jacqueline described her sensitivity around that issue.

> So you don't really fit in if you're the one Black person who figured it out and broke the cycle and was like, "you know what, I don't have to subscribe to this dumb race stereotype that has been brought up somewhere along the way." I like reading: I'm going to read. I'm not good at basketball: so what. And it's hard, because that's not a mentality that I think is really prevalent in the Black community (Jacqueline 13:11).

Jacqueline was committed to doing better than others expected of her. She embraced her intelligence as a Black woman despite the stereotype that people like her were not.

Michelle also felt compelled to do and be better than people expected of her by being a role model for local children of color. She felt particularly aware of her race x

gender x academic identity with her “community of successful Black kids” as part of her Black service organization.

> That’s what most of our org does, is right now. We’re volunteering at a charter school, and then before we did [a community] center and everything. And that’s just really trying to get into the local kids that are predominantly Black and raising them up and showing examples and stuff. So I think, well in [the Black service group], all of them are really important when I’m trying to inspire or empower other people or children. I want to be a Black female college student that’s all of these things where people would be looking at me. (Michelle 20:33)

Being successful extended to life beyond the classroom for Michelle. Nicole felt similarly about her own campus involvement. High-achievement extended to her leadership role as a junior as a co-president of one of her groups. Nicole sensed pressure to be both an outstanding student and leader, sensing her peers’ expectation for her to take the lead.

> So yeah, just with organization involvement, it makes me just wanna do better for the world, that I don’t ever wanna just, I don’t want people to be like, “oh Nicole, you’ve really been slacking in helping on this.” And "oh no, Nicole like helped me do this. Nicole was an integral part of this initiative” and things like that. So I guess, I guess that makes me wanna be more involved in a way. (Nicole 24:44)

Nicole felt social pressure from peers to be excellent if she was going to be involved. She needed to achieve inside and outside the classroom to maintain a good impression from others and feel successful.

Students selected their involvement in accord with their identities. For Nicole and Michelle, their organizational involvement was a positive reflection of their most salient identities. Their concern about being more than what others expected of them was iterative of the social norms policing Black women’s performance of their identities. Their performance of self was in constant resistance to the social expectation that they

were not supposed to be "Black and smart" inside or outside the classroom. But this group of Black women persevered under pressure. They illustrated that there could be more than one way to be a smart Black woman in society, and especially in college. Even in cases where their families had been unsuccessful at college, these women were expected to find a way to make the most of their college opportunity. They were expected to be superwomen and there was no room for error.

Race x Gender Identity

Another stereotype associated with participant identities was the angry Black woman: a cultural construction associated with race x gender identities. Similar to other studies on Black college women, for the students in this study "race was gendered, and gender was racialized" (Winkle-Wagner, 2009, p. 24). Walley-Jean (2009) argued that the angry Black woman idea came from media portrayals. When "the overly aggressive, unfeminine matriarch" role was cast with Black women, the "stereotype [arose] from [this] foundation of negative images and the position of subordination of African American women that seeks to restrain their expression of anger by negatively labeling it" (p. 71). Instead of acknowledging the systemic and interpersonal issues that confronted people like the ones in this study, society "accused [them] of unjustified anger or irrationality if they express anger directly" (p. 71). Knowing that reinforcing that behavior was at risk, some participants held their tongue in class when they disagreed with others.

Shantel reflected on how the concerns she shared about her college experience might be perceived by others. She was self-conscious about expressing herself while not being perceived the way she intended.

> If I'm the only Black girl in the class I take notice of that, because it's like, wow. You know, why am I the only Black girl in this classroom? How do I avoid being labeled an angry Black girl? How do I avoid making people uncomfortable, but then why should I? (Shantel 30:12).

Shantel was concerned about what people would say if she brought up race or gender in class: two issues that were salient to her diversity course discussion as well as her lived reality. "I just don't want to come across as something that I'm not, you know?" (Shantel 30:12). Shantel's affect was anything but loud or aggressive: in her interviews she spoke softly and avoided eye contact. Yet she still felt subject to that assumption about her performance as a Black woman.

Lauryn, who was much more vivacious and opinionated than Shantel, felt the pressure of the same stereotype. She mentioned choosing not to speak up when she disagreed in class. There was tension between wanting to speak up about social issues that mattered to her and being labeled an angry Black woman when she was not even angry.

> And I think it's really, even in humanities, sometimes we talk about race or something like that. And for some reason, well in the book that we're reading - a lot of them are really old, so they're not so fair to women. So then I think I notice that. But if you always speak up about it, then people will just think you're an angry Black girl. So I think it's definitely hard to, you know? Of course you still want to speak up, so you allow people to think that that's what you are, but it's definitely not there because, you know, that doesn't mean you're angry. It's just you just don't agree (Lauryn 12:45).

Being measured in her participation meant that Lauryn had to allow herself to be defined by others' assumptions out of concern for the reaction she might garner if she spoke up.

After reflecting on her college experience, Miranda did describe herself as angry sometimes. Particularly in light of the glaring social inequities broadcast by the media in America at the time, she felt limited in how she could express herself.

> At first, I would get angry, and it was a very stifled anger I guess, just because I knew I couldn't actually like vocalize my anger because if I vocalize my anger, then I just feed into whatever kind of stereotype they are projecting onto me. If I'm in the classroom and I'm silent for no apparent reason, I just bite my tongue, and I work my way back into conversation in time. I don't interrupt anyone. I try my best not to get into the whole respectability politics things and like play down parts of my identity, but I also, I don't feel like fighting all the time (Miranda 22:12).

All three women had something to say. But they all felt that sharing their perspective would be misunderstood, especially if they displayed any emotion around it. They feared that speaking up, particularly on topics of race or social justice, might allow them to be misperceived. Even when they were upset about something that held significance to them, they actively avoided coming off as aggressive, loud or angry. The findings in the present study were consistent with the experiences of the undergraduate Black women in other studies where students had the same concerns about how they might be perceived by peers (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). In their review of extant research, Donovan and Guillory (2017) justified the women's concerns, arguing "historical stereotypes of Black women" still applied in modern context (p. 193).

Academic Identities

During the interviews, the researcher listed all of the identities that were associated with the student's participation in the study. The list included the honors identities the participant selected during the interview, the racial or ethnic identity indicated on their background questionnaire, female, and college student. Participants then added any additional identities or group memberships they felt mattered to their self-description.

Table 4.1
Frequency of Participant Self-Description of Academic Identity Terms

	High-	Smart	Academically	Gifted

	Achieving		Talented	
Selected by Participants	13	10	5	1

Table 4.1 shows participants' selections of the honors descriptors that fit them best as part of that exercise. Nearly all of the students felt the term high-achieving was a good fit for their academic identity. They also described themselves as smart. Academically talented and gifted were not among their preferred terms.

High-Achieving

Students associated being high-achieving with being a "go-getter," "driven," "disciplined," "getting high grades," and "not willing to settle." Earning good grades was definitely important to the participants. Keshia felt the term fit her well. "I see myself as high achieving because I know that I don't like to settle. I cried when I got a 3.67 GPA this past semester" (Keshia 22:46). Standard academic measures of achievement factored into the participants' definitions and performance of being high-achievers. Also common was the idea that high-achievers were willing to put in work to achieve their goals. Shannon described them as people who "go above and beyond even though they don't have to. So they'll put in extra work to attain their goal… they're not just trying to get that easy A" (6:44). Effort played a role in achieving their goals.

Zoe described herself as a high-achiever, one of those "people who are just always striving to get to a better place than where they are now" (Zoe 32:29). Nicole also described herself with this term, noting that high-achievement can be inside and outside the classroom. It means "you're just shooting to do your best and to be the best out of your peers and be at a next level versus everyone else" (Nicole 30:33). Amber

described herself the same way. And Mia agreed, noting that high-achievers are "always doing a lot, signing up for things, giving back to other people, [and] maybe receiving awards" (Mia 26:29). In contrast to how the literature describes the term in reference to honors students, the participants felt high-achievement meant more than just SAT scores and GPA. It also did not require natural smarts. "You just try really hard," Lauryn observed (24:39). Particularly when they described their own achievements, effort and a sense of agency played a role in whether the participants were successful with their big goals.

The high-achieving label did not fit for a few of the participants because they reasoned that it required giving 100 % of their effort or attention to something. If they sensed they could give more to some aspect of their involvement or academics, then they would not achieve as highly as they felt capable. Miranda and Crystal were particularly critical of their achievements.

> I walk away from opportunities a lot, just because I feel like I have too many, and I don't want to overwhelm myself. So sometimes I'll just opt out of applying for something or, you know, signing up for the extra seminar or something. Because I know that I want to go, and I know I'm interested in this, but I do not have the time, and I can't give it 100% (Miranda 28:30).

As a very involved student leader who was also focused on her academics, limitations on her time prevented her from achieving all of the things she could. Crystal was less involved in campus life and agreed that her lack of effort kept her from achieving, but she believed she would be a better, higher achiever if she actually applied herself. Being high-achieving would mean "accomplishing all the things that I've set out for myself... maybe even accomplishing things that I never perceived… I was able to" (Crystal 16:30).

Her assessment of her college performance was that she had yet to reach that level but she had the potential.

Smart

Participants commonly defined smart as "intelligent," "book smart," and "academic success." Keshia defined the term by saying "it just means that they do well in academics. I think when people look at honor students and say we're smart, they're like, 'oh, you get your A's in your classes, you know a lot of things, you do well in college classes" (Keshia 22:41). As Keshia's description suggested, for many of the students being smart was associated with good grades and performing well on tests.

They also expected that smart meant particular characteristics and behaviors that test scores did not measure. Smart could be performative. Grace was talented in the arts: she sang and played multiple instruments. "I think it ties in with being good at things. Being good at playing an instrument would mean that you're smart musically. Or if you're good at coming up with ideas, then you're smart intellectually" (Grace 18:39). Zoe felt that being smart meant "knowing yourself, plus a willingness to learn or an eagerness to learn, and then the ability to use the information that you have resourceful[ly]" (32:28). Aisha and Jacqueline agreed. "I feel like smart is someone who knows a lot of things, who knows how to apply the knowledge that they know" (Aisha 10:28). Jacqueline noted that "it's not enough to just know the facts from the textbook. You have to be able to make them actionable and put them into context" (20:35). It was important to continue gaining knowledge and understand how to apply it.

There was a difference between book smarts and street smarts, and many noted that the kind associated with honors students tended not to be street smart. They

supposed that a person who is smart should also have common sense, but was a quality "which a lot of people lack," according to Amber (12:8). "I have engineering friends who are brilliant, absolutely brilliant, but can't function sometimes" (Amber 12:8). Serena and Jacqueline echoed Amber's sentiments. Mia felt that an important part of being smart was "knowing what's right and what's wrong" and making good decisions (26:28). "I try not to base intelligence off of test scores or anything. It's more about the person and how they react to things" (Mia 26:28). Simply being book smart and able to do well in classes did not mean that a person was smart in every area of her life.

They varied in their perceptions about the amount of agency required to be labeled or perform smartness: it could be innate or a product of effort. Lauryn described both in her definition of smart and felt the term did not apply to her.

> Well, I guess that there's some people who are naturally "smart," and they may be very good at math or science or something like that. But then I think there's also people who just work really hard to do better, and so they would be considered smart too. I mean, I think it's a hard word because sometimes people will be like, 'oh, you're so smart,' but really if they just worked the same amount, then they would really be in the same place. So sometimes, it's kind of like that. (Lauryn 24:38)

Lauryn felt that other people could improve their grades or academic performance by working hard like people who were labeled smart. Anissa felt the same way, particularly as applied to one of her friends from high school whom she considered smart, but was lazy. "Anyone can be smart if they try. It's not something you're born with" (Anissa 14:27). Anissa's view was evident in how she described encouraging her high school friend to go to class and do his homework so he would get better grades (14:27). According to Nicole, students would be "taking that extra mile to study versus just getting by" if they were smart (Nicole 30:32). There was agency in determining if a

student would be considered smart, based on Lauryn, Anissa, and Nicole's ideas. Studying, being diligent, and working hard could pay off.

Although most participants felt that it was complimentary to be described as smart, a few acknowledged that there could be a stigma associated with the term, particularly as they reflected on how they were treated in regards to that label in other contexts. "I used to think it was an insult back in the day. Like 'Oh, you're so smart.' The way people would say it. It's like oh, is that not a good thing to be smart? Doesn't that take you places?" (Nicole 30:32). Nicole's peers tried to make her feel bad about having good academic performance, insinuating that it was different in a bad way and not okay to be smart. Miranda had another connotation of smart. "Even when I was younger, actually, it was kind of used to punish me a little bit. It's like 'Are you trying to be smart'? Like, you had an attitude" (Miranda 28:27). In familial context, when she needed to be respectful of authority, it could be inappropriate to be smart or behave like a know-it-all. Other students shared similar school age experiences as well, and alluded to the role those earlier experiences played in how well the list of honors identities described them. The variety of connotations for this term suggested that the participants received mixed messages from their social, academic, and familial environments about the meaning of their smart identity and whether it was something constructive or socially acceptable.

Academically Talented

The term academically talented was used by the researcher to add more inclusive language to the discourse on honors students. Participants described academically talented as people who "perform better in classes," are "good at schoolwork," and "book

smart." Amber described being academically talented as related to the "the amount that you put into learning that material. I think you can be talented, but not get the results that you want, because you don't put the work into it" (Amber 12:9). Putting in work was also key to Anissa's understanding of the term.

> You have to study to be academically talented. You can't just, you know, just read the book and then go take a test. That isn't going to get you a good grade on the test. You're not understanding the material you're just knowing it. I feel like if you don't apply it, I don't think you're academically talented in my opinion (Anissa 14:30).

Application and effort mattered in many of the other participants' definition as well. In contrast, Crystal felt the term referred to an innate quality. "I think talent's also something that you're naturally good at, so it's just where you thrive, and academics is for academically talented" (Crystal 16:31). Participants had a lot of opinions about the term, but only five added the term to their list of descriptors.

Michelle felt the term fit her. She described academically talented people as "good at schoolwork. So, good at studying and organizing, getting things in on time, and asking questions. Just good at figuring out how they can learn stuff" (Michelle 3:34). Serena adopted the term as well, suggested it referred to exceling at school, understanding concepts, and passing tests. Nicole liked calling herself academically talented as well. It meant "you get really good grades. Maybe you know how to finesse a test and can really make a good, write a good paper and sound eloquent. I think that just means you're a superstar in school, in your classes and stuff like that. Academically talented, yeah, a smarty pants basically, but not in a sassy way" (Nicole 30:34). As Nicole's definition suggested, ascriptions of ability could be associated with having an attitude or an air of arrogance. She was careful to clarify her meaning.

A number of the definitions associated academically talented with the other honors labels, particularly among students who indicated it was not a salient part of her identity. Shantel indicated that she felt "like that's another word for smart, academically talented. They're good at school or good at school-related things" (Shantel 8:37). Amber related the term with the idea of smart as well. And Shannon felt the terms were similar too, but academically talented had a different tone than smart, though she could not describe the differences she sensed.

> I feel like a student would be someone who, like I want to say someone who's actually really interested in what they're learning. They're not just trying to get the grade, but they really are taking it. They want to do something with that work, but also it somehow comes easy to them, the talent aspect. Because I feel like a talent is something that comes naturally, we don't have to work at it. (Shannon 6:45)

Shannon went on to indicate that academically talented was the same as smart, and gifted and academically talented were the same.

Gifted

Only one participant described herself as gifted. Many of their constructions of the term were associated with innate abilities or biology. Nicole described a gifted person as "someone that's just a little bit smarter or does better in the subject or something like that. They're wired differently so that they're, they can go to the next level in that subject" (Nicole 30:35). Others said gifted people had "special talents," were "born smart," or had a "natural" ability to do well at something on the first try. People could be gifted academically or in music, art, sports or other extracurricular endeavors.

A few of the students associated the term with their participation in special programs in primary or secondary school: they took achievement or IQ tests and were

placed into resource or project classes to enhance their academic curriculum. At this point in their academic careers, however, they no longer felt that label was appropriate for them. Crystal reflected on being gifted as a child and the differences she felt in her aptitude as a college student.

> I used to think I was, I guess gifted, but that has since changed since entering college. So, just, I was definitely the person in high school that didn't try. I could listen and, you know, I guess internalize and regurgitate later, 'cause that's all learning is in high school. And now that it's not internalize and regurgitate, it's more like internalize and apply, it's not, I can't excel the way I used to or excel in the same manner. (Crystal 16:34)

In college, the expectations for learning and understanding information were different than in high school: Crystal felt she was not gifted anymore because she could not use the same effortless methods for learning from prior educational environments. Crystal described a common transition issue many new college students face: formerly successful ways of learning in their high school classroom environment were not a good fit for the demands of their college academic environment. The new teaching and learning environment required the need to adapt their learning style (Bandura, 1986). Anissa's definition was consistent with other participants but drew attention to other factors in the outcomes associated with giftedness.

> I feel like when people use the word gifted it seems inherent. Like the child was born with it. But I feel like you're not born intelligent or academically talented, it's something you achieve over time. It's based on your circumstance and how you're brought up and what your own personal goals are and based on what your parents instill in you (Anissa 15:16).

Jacqueline described herself as gifted and agreed with Anissa's assessment. There was more than biology involved in being good at things: there were sociocultural and economic privileges that helped foster those abilities.

Academic Identity Salience. The way students chose to describe their academic identities reflected the way they were acculturated in society as part of their position at the nexus of various social groups. Despite many of them fitting their own definitions of smart, high-achieving, academically talented or gifted, the students were reluctant to adopt them. They alluded to the ways their peers or others might perceive them if they acknowledged their achievements and abilities which made them problematic.

The results suggest that students were socialized not to talk about how intelligent or accomplished they were, particularly as Black women. There was palpable tension between being their honors identities and feeling comfortable acknowledging those abilities. Michelle's perceptions illustrated that concern. "I feel like, oh, I'm showing off if I say I'm smart and academically talented. But I feel like I wouldn't be here if I wasn't" (Michelle 3:35). She was reluctant to own her academic identifiers because she felt it was "show offy." She explained why she felt that way about being smart:

> Because self-praise is kind of like, I don't know… It's not as if it's looked down on, but you kind of look at people sideways when they talk about how great they are, even though everyone's supposed to be proud of all of their things that they've achieved and how good they are at things. But then when you talk about it, it's like, stop. (Michelle 3:35).

Michelle alluded to the mixed messages she received about having pride in her achievements. Instead of touting their own accomplishments, Keshia and Shantel mentioned that others would describe them as high-achieving. Though Shantel did not like the labels for herself, she felt her family did.

> So I know that my mom would use the word smart to describe me, academically talented, high-achieving because whenever I get, like all my report cards, if they were good, which they usually were - like straight As and stuff like that - she would put it on Facebook, show all her friends, tell

> everybody, you know. So I know that she's proud of me as far as that goes, and she would describe me as smart" (Shantel 8:38).

It was alright for others, but not for them, to acknowledge their abilities.

Students expressed concern about how they would be perceived by their peers and society more broadly if they brought attention to their achievements if they accepted the high-achieving label. Despite the various constructive and judgmental connotations it carried, most participants were willing to own that term as part of their identity. As the sample for this qualitative study was not representative of the greater population of all Black undergraduate women in honors colleges, adding the term academically talented to the discourse may benefit future research on this group. The overlap in participants' definitions across the existing terms and academically talented suggested that this may offer a suitable replacement term in future research.

Numerous participants stressed the importance of natural talent or giving full effort into their goals as part of the reason for their achievement. Although those ideas play a role in their performance, they are all intrinsic explanations of success. They ignore the structural barriers that sometimes limit the access to resources or social capital that might also enhance their ability to succeed. The challenges inside and outside the classroom drew attention to those issues. Neglecting external influences on their performance meant students may blame themselves for not achieving to their full potential when it may be a combination of internal and less visible external obstacles. Their perceived and tangible barriers got in the way of them being even more accomplished than they were at the time of the study.

Despite mentioning how some of the achievement terms did not fit, participants' definitions were fairly descriptive of their academic outcomes and performance. People were socialized differently - along the lines of race, class, gender, among other identities - so the disconnection with the terms was also an indicator of a social stigma that people in this population were not commonly associated with intelligence. It also signaled the need for a revision in the language used to describe honors students - methodologically as well as in practice – to enhance how this population of students was supported by faculty and staff or recruited by admissions.

Identities in the Classroom

Curriculum

Study participants critiqued their major and other required courses for the glaring absence of the experiences of people of color in their syllabi. In the limited instances when a variety of racial, gender, or other identity groups were mentioned in the class topics, they addressed surface level ideas. Students perceived those topics as curricular afterthoughts. The lack of writers and textbooks about or by their own racial and other backgrounds was notable.

Mia noticed this issue in her courses. "The content we cover in class, I feel like it's very exclusive of certain groups. And some professors will attempt to be inclusive, but it's very preliminary. They don't really go in depth, they just touch on something" (Mia 27:3). As a political science major, Miranda's program exposed her to broad ideas such as how different populations tend to vote, but beyond the demographic statistics, there was no discussion of those people's various identities or life experiences. Over three years of classes, the texts in her major coursework did not reflect any aspects of her

own background or her community's experiences. Miranda mentioned that in one of her classes, "we read one Toni Morrison book, and every other book was by a white male author, centered white male protagonists, and it was draining. So as much as I like some of my classes, I still have classes where that's the norm and no one notices." This token representation sent the message that the experiences of people like Miranda were not important to discuss in her field.

As a social science major, Shantel was particularly cognizant of the absence of writers from her own background across her academic coursework. In her required humanities course, she knew the professor's objective was to challenge students' perspectives of the world, but she had her own ideas on how to do so.

> Then I can think of quite a few that would … I would hope would open the eyes of some people because we have issues on the home front. And if he's trying to get us to see things from a different perspective, then I think there should definitely be some literature from authors of color who are talking about their experiences as a person of color here in America. That's a really important perspective to try to understand. Um… and it's useful because you… I dunno. It's not to say that you won't take anything away from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, but… I didn't… (Shantel 31:2).

Excluding the voices of people of color from the curriculum was a historical systemic issue; in a more diverse world and with more diverse students in college classrooms, universities need to remedy that limitation of the curricula across academic majors.

Being the Only One

A common experience among the students was perceiving they were the only one with their identities in their classrooms. Especially in their honors courses, they were "painfully aware," as Anissa put it, that they were different. Their minority status in class - as the only Black student or the only woman in science or math - meant their

performance of their visible identities carried the weight of representation and tokenization. In the absence of many diverse others, students described how their behaviors could be attributed to their Blackness and femaleness instead of the student identity they had in common with classmates.

Being the only one was especially imposing in class on the topic of race. Often the only one in her courses, Mia was frustrated about the way discussions of race made it hard to be in the classroom. "I don't feel like I have to speak on behalf of the entire Black community, but people always expect me to," she said. Being the spokesperson for her race or other identities was not a role Mia desired. Nor did Jacqueline, but she often felt compelled to "enlighten" her classmates.

The readings for Jacqueline's required diversity course introduced students to a different marginalized group each week: the focus on breadth limited the depth of study on various racial groups. Because the texts were not a complete reflection of the lived experiences of the populations they studied, Jacqueline's peers would ask her about her own as an African American. She admitted feeling uneasy in the days leading up to the readings on her racial group. "I felt like I was inherently dreading having to go into class that Friday because I knew this would be the week I'd have to speak the most" (Jacqueline, 20:11). Other classroom experiences had conditioned her to anticipate the need to be spokesperson, though she had some reluctance to serve that role. "I know that's kind of a selfish thing to say, but I'm not here to educate anybody, you know. I'm trying to do my own thing. And so if some of the texts that we chose could in themselves give a more complete picture, people wouldn't feel like they had to come to me to fill in

the gaps" (Jacqueline 20:11). Jacqueline felt compelled to represent her identity groups because her peers would not get insight from their texts.

Miranda also problematized being the educator on race in her classroom:

> It's not my job to educate someone else about [race], so sometimes not talking about it is okay, because I would rather have good discussions that actually help everyone involved than have discussions where I constantly feel like I have to explain things or answer for my whole race or just things like that. I'd rather just not (Miranda 22:38).

For both students, the classroom presented a burden to educate others about her background as if it were representative of what all African Americans experienced.

Shannon alluded to this concern about representing as well, particularly as it related to how she was perceived in the classroom. "In a school setting, I just try to be that high-achieving student. I don't feel like I'm representing all Trinidadian women in the world or Black women. I'm just trying to be myself, but I know that my actions or whatever could set a path for someone else to have a good impression on someone" (Shannon 24:20). She understood that her achievements and performance might impact future students who look like her and so she behaved in a way that curried favor. "That's not my goal: I'm just trying to be the best version of myself," she added. In her description of her intentions, Shannon rejected the burden of being a model student to debunk assumptions instructors might make about her racial or other visible identities. However, her self-description reflected a pattern similar to the burden of representation that many of the other participants acknowledged influenced their classroom performance.

Low Salience Identities

Part of each interview included students creating their own list of self-identifiers. Among the commonly omitted ones were their spiritual, political, and sexual orientation identifiers. In the member check, participants revisited their original list and omitted those same identities for a second time. When asked about them, students had a variety of reactions. Most were willing to identify themselves to the researcher as a member of those groups. Consistent with Sellers & Shelton's (2003) construct of racial salience, in the section that follows, I analyzed the relative importance of the other identities that many of the participants described as playing little to no role in how they made meaning of their experiences at college.

Spirituality

Only three students brought up their spirituality during their first interviews. Even after further discussion in the member check, most of the participants still omitted their spiritual identity from their lists. Mia identified herself as having grown up Catholic but rarely went to mass during the semester. Before the start of her member check, Anissa mentioned attending church fairly regularly, but did not offer spirituality as a part of her self-descriptors. Serena also left Christianity off of her list. She felt her other identities were more important. Michelle's family was Christian on one parent's side and Muslim on the other, and her parents intentionally observed neither in her household. Similarly, Lauryn mentioned being active in her church community at home, but felt that the conflict between her spiritual identity and sexual orientation made that complicated. "If I go to anything that's church related, you notice that you're gay. But nobody, they might

not notice it, but you think about it," Lauryn reflected (16:53). Spirituality did not hold a place at the core of most of the women's self-concept.

Zoe had a mostly Muslim family but did not identify with it. Most members of her family had Islamic names. The aunt she was closest with practiced Oshun, an African spiritual practice. She did not feel any of those were important parts of who she was or how she saw the world. Shannon's family identified as Christian when they were in Trinidad, but not since living in America. Some of the students left their spiritual identity off of their list because it was more associated with their families than with their own identity.

Social Class

Students were aware of varying economic backgrounds among their friends and peers, but sensed that at their urban university it was not a major point of concern when interacting with other students. As Miranda observed, living in a city, most people took public transportation to get places, so it was hard to see the indicators of social status the way she could in high school. But since Miranda worked to pay her own bills, she alluded to her awareness of some needing jobs in college and others who had more privileged financial circumstances. Crystal and Keshia lived with other women whose families paid for all of their college expenses, including giving them money to spend on going out and shopping. They were more aware of the differences in the way they approached money from their roommates.

A few acknowledged that Atlantic was in a predominantly low-income neighborhood, which seemed to draw some stigma from peers. The university had a legacy for providing educational opportunities for working class people and that was

reflected in its diverse undergraduate population which included a number of non-traditional and part-time students, often from the local area. Jacqueline was frustrated by her peers cofounding race with poverty. "Another stereotype of Black culture, aside from being like well you're Black so you're dumb, is you're Black so you're poor" (Jacqueline 13:13). One edge of Atlantic was bordered by a low-incoming housing community, which seemed to impact how people perceived her on campus, assuming she was a local resident. "And so it's hard having two identities that don't, in most people's minds, coexist together, you know. Being an upper-middle class African American person or just being an upper-middle class person in general around here" (Jacqueline 13:13). The assumed intersections of race and class made her feel uncomfortable.

Polytech was a private, more selective institution located in a business district, but had a less wealthy neighborhood not too far away. Polytech's higher tuition meant more economically privileged students. Shannon could definitely see signs of people's affluence there.

> I'm pretty aware of it. I think based off of all of my friends - all of my friends have part time jobs and we are all like "let's not go out tonight, we can't spend the money." But it is Polytech, so our students do have more money and probably don't have a job, and their parents pay for everything. And then just being in this city you see poverty (Shannon 29:6).

Her family helped her out with college expenses, but Shannon also identified herself as someone who knew she needed to be employed to have what she needed at college.

Political

The political science majors were the only participants who felt their political identities mattered in their self-descriptions. "I think in college it's kind of one of those things that's assumed, especially in an urban setting, that everyone's liberal. I don't necessarily

think that's the case," Miranda observed (23:5). She thought her peers were not critical about politics, and noticed from her interactions with peers that they felt it's "just whatever. It doesn't really matter," when she felt passionately that there were issues that affected her life and other students collectively.

Some participants expressed that they choose not to share those identities on their list because they were private. Serena mentioned that she was a liberal but did not really talk about it. Others omitted them out of concern for being judged based on those identities, particularly within the context of the charged political climate at the time. Data collection for the study coincided with the spring before a contentious presidential election in the United States. Atlantic seemed to be predominantly liberal and accepting, but some of the students admitted that they were avoiding voicing their alliances and opinions about politics, and other group membership, in most contexts - especially socially and on social media - because they were trying to avoid backlash from peers. Zoe felt that accepting a political label might be used to assume other things about who she is or what she believes, but that she was more than that one identity.

> My decision to vote does not solely depend on my age and my so called entitlement. It also depends on my race and my gender, because we are all intersectional beings. We are not just one thing. Not a single one of us. We're not Black in one moment or white in one moment and then transgender in another moment and then female – that's not how it works. So who I vote for is not just because I'm a millennial and I want free education. It's also because like I'm Black and I want someone to think about the human rights that Black people deserve that they aren't getting or like all of these other things (Zoe 33:10).

The presidential campaign season made Zoe and other participants feel particularly sensitive about the significance of that aspect of her identity.

Sexual Orientation

Most of the participants indicated that they were straight. Identifying themselves with heterosexual social norms made sexual orientation less salient for Shannon, Zoe and Miranda. Each noted that she did not pay attention to that aspect of her identity. Zoe was "normal," Shannon mentioned her boyfriend, and Miranda said she was cisgender and straight when they were asked why they did not mention it as part of how they identify.

The non-heterosexuals addressed the heteronormativity that limited their sexual expression. They were very aware of their differences from mainstream society, particularly as they were in the midst of their identity development in that part of their lives. As Black queer, bicurious, and lesbian women, they were aware of how the intersections could complicate their participation in social spaces designed to support only one of those identities. Michelle noted that it was hard to be Black and queer on campus because she had difficulty finding other Black people who shared this identity. Lauryn noticed the racial gap in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community, too.

As a peer mentor in the sexuality center on campus, Lauryn was critical of the lack of people of color on the staff. "I feel like a lot of the people who are in the center are really aware of LGBT stuff, but they're almost all white in there. Which I think is, you notice a difference" (Lauryn 17:12). She perceived there was a visible lack of intersectional support on issues of race and gender identity at her university. In campus life, Serena noticed that she was usually in a group that only addressed one of her identities at a time, not all of them. She also felt that being at college made it easier for her to embrace her sexual orientation:

I was able to think about more, being bisexual because I did it. Most of

> the, ‘cause it was really tough you know. Back in, when I was in high school, you didn’t really see, or everyone was either gay or straight or a lesbian, and then you still didn’t really see the LGBT or you didn’t see those other groups that were not heterosexual. So I didn’t really, I kinda, I think I put that in the back of my mind and because of that I didn’t really, I just didn’t address that part, the other side of me (Serena 26:31).

Once Serena got to college, she felt allowed to develop psychosocially in a way that she was inhibited in high school. Her reflection on her sexual orientation was most aware of the sociopolitical challenges of being a Black woman among other identities and the ways society viewed people like her. The queer Black women in the study drew attention to the need for existing campus organizations to be more inclusive of people like them who live at the intersections of sometimes competing identity groups.

Conclusion

Social norms and expectations played a role in how participants described the salience of their complex identities. The way they constructed meaning around those various identities was evidence that they were more than a member of any one identity group. Their interactions in interpersonal, organizational and other social spaces illustrated the importance and overlap among their identities. They were the only one, the default educator, the angry Black woman, and the superwoman achiever.

The stereotypical roles they avoided were consistent with Donovan and Guillory’s (2017) idea that “historical stereotypes of Black women are projected onto contemporary Black college women by their peers” (p. 193). Black women needed to maintain a fine balance between conforming and resisting, just enough to be neither “acting White” nor “inauthentic,” or “ghetto/unrefined” or “unintelligent” (p. 193).

The conditions associated with being the only one in the present study were consistent with a theme by the same name in the findings in Winkle-Wagner's study of a group of Black undergraduate women (2009). It also echoed the "Black achiever isolation" discussed in another study of Black high-achieving undergraduates (Fries-Britt, 1998). Students in the present study described their status as "the only one" in their classrooms as inducing pressure to perform in a particular way, isolating, and as attracting unwanted attention from their peers and instructor. Despite their intellectual ability to excel in the class, the conditions were unjust.

This section shed light on the unjust and unnecessary burdens that the Black high-achieving undergraduate women in this study had to bear because of their identities. Students like the ones in this population yearned for an opportunity to be in a collegiate environment that did not police their self-expression and allowed them to be their authentic selves. The next chapter discusses the implications for these findings and how to incorporate these students' stories into solutions that can improve their experiences.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Intersectionality and High-Achieving Black Women

Intersectionality provided a valuable lens to examine the contexts, interactions, and experiences of the high-achieving undergraduate Black women in the study. As a theoretical framework, intersectionality drew attention to the systems of power at play in society and their manifestations in the classroom and in campus life (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991). At its core, intersectionality argued for the importance of considering people multidimensionally, noting that each person was more than their outward presentation of their perceived race or gender; they were both of those things, as well as the combination of all the mutually influential identities in between. Participants in the study acknowledged the threats to their identities, and were cognizant of the role they played in being ignored or erased or pre-judged in their interactions with peers and instructors. By bringing those threats to light for others in this population, this research can prepare future undergraduates who may also face those negative interactions and foster their resilience.

By drawing attention to the "cultural construction" of images of Black women in college, this study acknowledged the often invisible experiences of Black women high-achievers in campus life and society (Crenshaw, 1991). This representational intersectionality acknowledged the significance of the participants' performance of their racialized and gendered identities as their pursuit of the all-achieving Black superwoman or aversion of the angry black woman stereotypes. Participants fluctuated between being

silent - hiding their feelings, ideas, and expertise - or speaking up and out or doing it all - being leaders, and achievers.

This study also reflected the assumptions that guide intersectional approaches (Hancock, 2007). Consistent with Stewart (2009), examining the identity salience for participants illustrated the importance of acknowledging the mutual influence of the identities in various contexts, not just considering each one statically and alone. Research that aims to make a difference in the lives of Black high-achieving women and other minoritized students must address the heterogeneity among their identity groups.

From a structural perspective, intersectionality provided a framework to understand the significance of the experiences of these talented young people and to crafting organizational solutions. Campus life was a microcosm of society. Systemic issues such as racism, sexism, and classism all played a role in the participants' college experience. From the lack of racial diversity in their honors colleges to the exclusion of diverse voices in their curricula, oppressive forces and social norms were existent in every context. The participants' membership in more than one socially oppressed group necessitated that those same identities which factored into their experiences should also play a role in any solutions aiming to support them (Hancock, 2007; Stewart, 2009). This research study provided data that can drive policy changes and programmatic initiatives to foster more inclusive university environments. The next section considers the participants' identities and outlines how universities could better support academically talented undergraduate Black women in their navigation of campus life and beyond.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Spaces and Environments

How welcomed or othered students felt inside and outside the classroom mattered; it played a role in their impressions of the university and their place - or lack thereof - within their social or academic communities. The experiences of study participants in campus life reinforced the need for predominantly white institutions (PWIs) to address the tone of the various spaces high-achieving Black women occupy. From the residence halls to student organizations, students felt noticeably different from their peers who shared few aspects of their identities, especially their racial or academic identities. Numerous participants were bothered by the lack of racial and other kinds of diversity; social opportunities to connect them with other high-achieving students of color would enhance their connection to the university.

Staff need to create spaces that can serve as hubs for gatherings of this population, and other minoritized groups among high-achievers, where students can feel safe to privately vent, reflect, and process their experiences navigating their PWI without the critique of their peers. Optimally, this would mean that students feel empowered to create their own gatherings among existing spaces to foster community as well. Especially after major social issues impact their various identity communities, having the tools and resources to gather in solidarity will help students feel at home. There needs to be a demonstration of support from the university to sustain their efforts and signify a commitment to their success. There needs to be a provision of financial support for their programmatic efforts. And staff who advocate for these students need to be willing to

listen to them, even when what they have to say is critical of the university, and to take action to make environments more welcoming where possible.

Creating Support Networks

A few of the participants suggested having upperclassman mentors of color help younger high-achieving Black women navigate college, particularly their honors experience. A student also suggested a welcoming event for high-achieving students of color to help connect them with research opportunities, finding balance, learning about university resources, and connecting with potential mentors: a modification of a STEM students of color institute she participated in and then helped present for her own university. Whether formal or informal, research shows that students in constructive mentoring relationships are retained, have a sense of connection with their institution, and are satisfied with their college experience, particularly students of color (Bledsoe & Rome, 2006; Baker, 2006).

In academic spaces, participants described a sense of tension between their desire to be good students and the expectations of their peers that they would behave in the stereotypical manner associated with their various identities. To avoid the spotlight they chose silence. But limited participation from high-achieving Black women in the classroom does not signify a lack of interest. As with their measured contributions to discussions, often the students were very interested in the subject matter, or even mastered it, but did not feel empowered to share their insights in class. Faculty can enhance classroom environments by creating opportunities for student discussion without putting students of color in the hot seat to enlighten their peers about race.

Classrooms would also be enhanced by the inclusion of more voices of color in the classroom (students and faculty) and the curriculum (selected readings and course/academic offerings). A more diverse set of learners and instructors would help high-achieving Black women feel less othered in the classroom for their racial, economic, nationality, or other identities. Faculty and academic departments can make intentional efforts to enhance curricula by adding authors of historically underrepresented populations to their syllabi and course offerings. Such efforts signal to students that their department is open to and welcomes their unique backgrounds and experiences to the classroom.

Faculty Support

At the PWI sites for this study, students may stumble upon the occasional professor of color, but especially in honors where high-achieving Black women are often the only person of color in their classrooms, it can be particularly powerful to have a professor who looks like them. This person has the power to reshape power dynamics about whose knowledge and contributions in the classroom matter, an issue which was a source of much isolation and silencing among the students in the study. Students considered faculty and staff of color role models, potential mentors, and stereotype-busters for majority students. Hiring more faculty and staff of color would be paramount

Faculty can also enhance the learning environment for this population by helping all students develop the analytical tools to constructively discuss issues in class among people with dissenting ideas, especially regarding race and other sensitive topics. University support to help faculty more confidently manage those discussions is essential. Potentially even more impact could be affected by a white instructor who is keen on

supporting the voices of all of the students in the class, not just the outspoken and confident majority students who are used to the privileged space of authority in classroom discussions. Part of this also entails checking and directly addressing the bias-related or insensitive language students may use to talk about or around their peers in class discussions. One strategy suggested by a study participant was to create a model for analyzing and discussing course readings, then gradually allow students to facilitate their own discussions and teachings, with the instructor's guidance and support.

Another strategy for faculty is to assign texts about or by diverse populations and assess students in ways that demonstrate they have a good understanding of the issues such as through guided discussions or a written book review. A successful integration of the content and the evaluation signals to students that the inclusion of the multicultural texts was not a token afterthought.

Enhancing Honors Colleges

Findings from this study bring attention to the ways honors colleges need to do more to address the needs of the Black women in their programs, echoing Freeman's (1999) call to action. There is a need for more faculty and staff of color, and there needs to be opportunities for community building to enhance the honors experience for high-achieving Black women.

Faculty and staff of color have the power to shift the sometimes chilly honors classrooms and hostile social environments into safe spaces. When they can also serve as vocal advocates, mentors, and role models, professionals of color can help all honors students have a more dynamic learning experience. Connecting high-achieving Black women with supportive scholars and mentors across campus, even non-honors instructors

and staff, would give them a better sense of support from their honors participation. The few numbers of faculty of color in honors at the PWIs in this study are reflective of the systemic barriers in society that manifest on college campuses. In order to see change, universities have to be willing to address recruitment and hiring processes that may limit access to candidates of color.

Both honors colleges had student organizations and programming aimed at engaging honors students outside the classroom. But at both institutions, students described honors as lacking community among students of color. As students of color, and especially as they reflected on "being the only one" in their majors or academic programs, it was hard for them to identify other students - of color or not - who were in honors. Honors colleges can address this concern by creating intentional opportunities through programming for students to gather based on their academic or social affinity and facilitating more networking opportunities. Building a network among Black students can help play a role in building that sense of community and coping with environmental challenges (Grier-Reed, 2013).

Future Research

This study is the beginning of a research agenda that will focus on expanding the research on academically talented Black undergraduate women to bring them to voice in the research and practice on college students, and redefining what it means to be high-achieving in college.

In order to include underrepresented populations, particularly at PWIs, high-achievement ability should not be characterized solely by students' performance in the

classroom; community involvement and demonstration of character are also important factors in determining a student's ability to achieve. This study began a dialogue with the extant literature to redefine what it labels a high-achieving undergraduate and shift the focus from test scores to more holistic evaluations of students' ability to be successful at college.

From my professional background in honors education, I am aware of the variations in honors admissions practices at institutions. Some universities only screen students for honors participation as part of the university application process for incoming first-year students. Precollege indicators, such as test scores, advanced coursework, and GPA, are most important in those cases and are often tied to university merit-based aid. In some of those cases the university admissions office manages honors admission as well. Other universities allow current students or transfer students to apply directly. Consideration for admission is based on college GPA and essays or references; this kind of process is often managed by the honors college itself. More holistic honors review processes would consider students' demonstration of leadership, community engagement, and ability to overcome personal or academic challenges. Current methods of selection for honors often leave this piece out of the admissions process, potentially overlooking a number of qualified candidates.

The study participants' diverse definitions of their academic identities reiterate the idea that the terms gifted, high-achieving, and honors need revisiting. More research is needed on academically talented students - both qualitative and quantitative - to better understand this population more broadly as well as its many minoritized subgroups, such as students who are low-income, first-generation, or immigrant among them. Future

research will also focus on a more diverse set of honors or academically talented students from varying age groups - such as non-traditional and early college goers - and those attending community colleges and historically Black institutions. Participation in an honors college is one way to provide support for academically talented students, but there are others that also warrant study. The researcher also aims to complete a longitudinal or ethnographic project to gain more comprehensive and deeper clarity about the experiences and salience of identities of high-achieving undergraduate Black women. With the support of more research on these talented students that meet a variety of criteria, practitioners can revise terminology - particularly by adding academically talented to the discourse - and inform admissions policies and student services that foster inclusivity and the appropriate kinds of support.

Limitations

Qualitative research studies focus on depth of examination over breadth, therefore the results of this study are not generalizable to or necessarily representative of the broader population of high-achieving Black women in college nationally. Limitations of the interview data collection method included the number of participants, depth over breadth, and the reliance on the researcher as the data collection tool. Learning about students' experiences inside and outside the classroom in two 60 – 75 minute semi-structured interviews cannot create a holistic illustration of the students' overall experience overcoming a variety of challenges in college. In addition, data collection took about eight months and this short time in the field is also a limitation. More interviews of a longer length and unstructured nature with more students might produce more and deeper

insight; however, as with all studies, there was a limited timeline. The method for this study created a snapshot of the students' experiences and an opportunity to use a sample of students from across academic years.

In contrast to Atlantic, where I was able to do a pilot study first, Polytech University was a new and unfamiliar environment with a smaller campus and honors college community. This newness came with an unfamiliar set of collegial interactions and professional expectations to navigate. The smaller population also meant there were fewer honors students and potentially even fewer Black women within its community. As such, there were challenges with the recruitment of participants, particularly using the methods used for the pilot study, which lengthened the data collection process. I attempted to adjust for this by asking participants for suggestions for where to advertise to get others to participate and encouraging them to refer their friends to the study. Unfortunately, there was no return on those requests and I was more successful recruiting a critical mass of participants at Atlantic. The lack of more participants from Polytech was a limitation to this study.

As discussed in earlier sections, using honors college affiliation as a proxy for high-achieving status remains problematic. There were Black women at Atlantic and Polytech that were not part of the honors college but whose collegiate academic performance and involvement would indicate that they could be labeled high-achieving. If honors were defined more inclusively, as if applying Harper and Quaye's (2007) focus on character and community involvement, they might have been eligible for the study but were not even potential participants under extant criteria.

Conclusion

Imagine all that smart Black women could accomplish if they perceived there were no judgments on their expressions of brilliance. To ensure that students like the ones in this study have the tools to become successful at college and remain so in society, universities need to enhance their resources for the Black high-achieving undergraduate women on their campuses. Honors colleges are but one way to enhance the social capital of and provide a more engaging academic experience for this population.

This study addressed a gap in higher education research by centering a group of academically talented Black women undergraduates. By sharing their experiences inside and outside the classroom, the participants shed light on their lived reality that being Black women, specifically Black high-achieving women, was more than just the sum of the parts of the participants' identities. They lived at the nexus of their mutually influential identities, a unique intersection of minoritized social groups that was often invisible in the higher education literature, on campus, and in society. Making the most of the supports they received from faculty and staff, and traversing the challenges presented in those same contexts without too much harm, enabled the students to be academically successful at institutions where most people did not share their identities. No student should have to endure such obstacles in their pursuit of success. Despite the messages society or campus life may send them, this study and the resilient Black high-achieving undergraduate women living in resistance at its center, were proof that students like them can and should be "Black and smart."

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Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Undergraduate Women

STUDY DESCRIPTION: The purpose of this dissertation study is to learn more about the experiences of academically-talented undergraduate Black women inside and outside the classroom at a predominantly white urban university. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a woman of color affiliated with the honors college at your university. Much of the research on students' experiences in college fails to include the perspectives of academically-talented Black or African-American women, such as those admitted to an honors program. This study aims to shed light on what it means to you to be one of these college women by interviewing current students in an honors college about their undergraduate experience.

* Required

Important Information About The Study

RESEARCH TEAM
Principal Investigator: Dr. James Earl Davis, College of Education, Temple University; Student Investigator: A. Musu Davis, Graduate Student, Department of Teaching and Learning & University Honors Program, Temple University

CONTACT THE RESEARCHERS
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has

hurt you, contact the research team by phone by calling Musu at 215-204-0713 or email the primary investigator at jdavis21@temple.edu. You can send mail to Temple University – Honors Program, 1809 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board as IRB Protocol # __22512__. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at irb@temple.edu for any of the following:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

TIME EXPECTATIONS

We expect that you will be in this research project for about 3 hours: the background questionnaire takes about 15 minutes and the initial in person interview is 60 - 90 minutes in duration. After your interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review it in person during at least one 30 - 60 minute follow up interview. The overall study will last about six months. The study will conclude once questionnaires and interviews have been completed with 12 - 16 participants.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE

If you agree to participate in this research study, data will be collected from you in two methods. First, you will independently complete a 10 – 15 minute online background questionnaire. Next, you will have an in-person interview with the student researcher which is 60 - 90 minutes in duration. The interviews will be scheduled via email communication with the student researcher. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. After your interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review

it in person during at least one 30 - 60 minute follow-up interview. Interviews will be conducted on your campus or off-campus at a location and time based on your availability. This research will be done in April through September 2015.

IF YOU PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY BUT LATER CHANGE YOUR MIND
If you decide to leave this study, there will be no negative consequences and it will not affect your status in the honors college. Your choice to participate or to withdraw is confidential and will not be shared with other participants or the honors staff. If you decide to leave this research after completing any of the stages of data collection, contact the research team so that the investigator can remove your data from consideration in the study.

RISKS & BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION
There are no risks associated with this research. As with any study, your participation may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable. We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from taking part in this research. However, it is possible that reflection on your experiences inside and outside the classroom as part of the interview may be therapeutic for you.

YOUR PERSONAL INFORMATION
To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of the personal information you share as part of your participation in this study to people who have to review it. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The IRB, your university's IRB, Temple University, Temple University Health System, Inc. and its affiliates, and other representatives of these organizations may inspect and copy your information.

To secure the data, all electronic files will be downloaded on a password-protected computer and stored in a private, password-protected folder on the student researcher's personal computer. To protect your identity, you will be assigned a pseudonym in the transcripts and you will only be referred to by that name in the study final report. Legal names and any personally identifying or sensitive information about you will be kept separate from your data from the study.

Your choice to participate in the study will remain confidential and your real identity will not be shared with other participants, staff in the honors college, or published in the final report. Results from this study, using pseudonyms only and in an aggregated report, may be shared with the dean

of the honors college upon request and will be reviewed with the primary investigator.

REMOVAL FROM THE STUDY
The student researcher or primary investigator in charge of this research can remove you from this research without your approval if you are determined to be ineligible for participation. Participants can be deemed ineligible if it is determined that they are not in the honors college or otherwise do not meet the requirements for participation. In addition, once the twelve to sixteen interviews have been conducted, any additional responses to invitations for participation will be excluded from participation.

AFTER THE STUDY
If you are interested in the results of the study, you may contact the student researcher via email at musu@temple.edu for more information in spring 2016 once the study has concluded and the report is completed.

Permission to Take Part in the Study

Please respond to the statements below to verify your permission to participate in the study. If you have any questions or would like this information reviewed with you in more detail please email musu@temple.edu for assistance.

I have read the above description of the study and agree to participate by completing this background questionnaire and in-person interviews *

You will have an additional opportunity to review this consent process with the student researcher in person at the time of the interview if you agree to participate in the second part of the study.

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

I verify that I am a member of the honors college at my university. *

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

My full name is _____ and I agree to participate in this study. *

Please type your full name in the space below

This electronic permission to participate in the study is effective as of today's date: *

mm/dd/yyyy

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Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Undergraduate Women

* Required

Your Personal Information

This section asks about your basic personal and academic information.

First Name *

Last name *

Preferred email address *

Your age *

Current major(s) *

List any declared minors or certificate programs

What is your cumulative GPA? *

What career do you plan to pursue after college? *

Anticipated graduation year & month *

I am currently a _____. *

Select your academic class year based on your anticipated graduation year

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Other:

What is the highest level of education you aspire to achieve? *

Select the option that reflects your professional or personal plans or hopes.

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate /JD/MD
- Other:

Did you grow up in the United States? *

- Yes
- No
- Other:

How do you identify ethnically? *

Indicate any word or collection of terms you use to describe yourself i.e. Black, African American, mixed, Nigerian, etc.

« Back Continue »

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Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Female Undergraduates: Pilot Study

* Required

Family Background

The following section asks about your family educational and economic characteristics.

What is the highest level of education obtained by your parent/guardian #1? *

- ○ Some high school
- ○ High school diploma
- ○ GED
- ○ Some college
- ○ Associate's or technical degree
- ○ Bachelor's degree
- ○ Master's degree
- ○ Doctorate /JD/MD
- ○ Other:

What is parent/guardian #1's familial relationship to you? *

i.e. mother, aunt, grandmother, legal guardian, etc.

What is the highest level of education obtained by parent/guardian #2? *

- ○ Some high school
- ○ High school diploma
- ○ GED
- ○ Some college
- ○ Associate's or technical degree
- ○ Bachelor's degree
- ○ Master's degree
- ○ Doctorate /JD/MD
- ○ I have only one primary guardian/parent
- ○ Other:

What is parent/guardian #2's familial relationship to you? *

i.e. father, uncle, grandfather, legal guardian, etc. Indicate N/A if only one primary guardian/parent.

What is your family's estimated annual household income? *

If you are financially independent from your family, your selection below should indicate your individual income.

- ○ under $18,500
- ○ $18,500 - $29,999
- ○ $30,000 - $49,999
- ○ $50,000 - $99,999
- ○ above $100,000

« Back Continue »

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Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Female Undergraduates: Pilot Study

* Required

Scheduling an Interview Session

You will be contacted via email to request and confirm an appointment time that fits your schedule.

Preferred interview location: *

- [ ] On campus
- [ ] Off-campus
- [ ] Other:

Availability for an interview during the next two weeks: *

Please include a list of dates and times, including weekends, when you are willing to be interviewed for this study. Interviews will require 60 - 75 minutes.

« Back Submit

100%: You made it.

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Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Female Undergraduates: Pilot Study

Your response has been recorded. The student researcher will contact you to setup an interview based on your availability. At your interview, you will review the Informed Consent Form to participate and you will have the opportunity to ask additional questions. You may also email musu@temple.edu if you have any questions or concerns about the study. Thank you for your participation.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Protocol Title:
Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Female Undergraduates: Dissertation Study

Investigators:
Principal Investigator: Dr. James Earl Davis, College of Education
Student Investigator: A. Musu Davis, Graduate Student, Department of Teaching and Learning; University Honors Program

Student Interview Protocol
Tell me about yourself:

- Describe your family – tell me about your siblings, parents, or other close family members.
- What made you pick this university for college?
- How did you know you wanted pursue your selected major?
- Tell me about some of the student organizations or social things you do on campus
    - Whom do you do those activities with?
- What kinds of things do you do locally/ off-campus?
    - Tell me about any jobs or service you're involved with
- Tell me about your friends – what do you like to do with them?
    - So you're gonna go to dinner, who would you ask?
    - With whom do you study?
    - Are these friends from the same group or different?
    - So when you do X, who do you spend time with?
- Tell me about your classmates – what is the nature of your interactions with them?

This first set of questions explores your perceptions about *different terms* sometimes used to describe honors students…

- One of the terms sometimes used to describe Honors students is "smart" – how would you define this term? What does that terms mean to you?
- Other terms include "high-achieving" or "academically talented" – what do those terms mean to you? How would you define them?

The next set of questions will engage you on your *personal identity*:

- What does it mean to you to be a high-achieving black female college student?
    - Would you use those terms to describe yourself?
    - Which terms do or don't fit for you?
- What other words would you use to describe yourself (your identity?)
- Personally, how important are these aspects of your identity in relation to one another?

- What does it mean to embody those aspects of your identity or to be who you are in various contexts at college? (The classroom? Student organizations? Among peers?)
- How do people talk about or seem to understand your identities based on your personal experiences?
- In your interactions with others, are there aspects of your identity with which you identify most?

The next set of questions will ask you to share about your personal experiences inside and outside the classroom:

- From your perspective, how important are the various aspects of your identity in your interactions with others in campus life?
- Tell me about a time or situation in the classroom in which you felt particularly sensitive about or noticed that your identities mattered in your interactions with others.
- Tell me about a time or social situation among your peers in which you felt sensitive about or noticed that your identities mattered in your interactions with others
- Are there any other particularly memorable situations that come to mind you might like to share?

The next set of questions will ask you to share about your personal and career aspirations*:*

- What are your plans for when you graduate from college?
    - How are you feeling about life after college?
- Tell me about where you see yourself five years from now.
- What are your career/ professional goals?
- When you share your career/ professional plans with your friends, what are their responses?
    - What about your family, what are their responses?
    - What about your peers, what are their responses?

Title of research: *Examining the Experiences of High-Achieving Black Female Undergraduates*

Investigator and Department: *Principal Investigator*: Dr. James Earl Davis, College of Education; *Student Investigator*: A. Musu Davis, Graduate Student, Department of Teaching and Learning & University Honors Program

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

You have been invited to participate in this research study because you are an undergraduate woman of color that has been identified as high-achieving or academically talented.

What should I know about this research?

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Whether or not you take part is up to you.
- You can choose not to take part.
- You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you.
- You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

Who can I talk to about this research?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, contact the research team by phone by calling Musu at 215-204-0713 or email the primary investigator at jdavis21@temple.edu. You can send mail to Temple University – Honors Program, 1809 North 13th Street, Philadelphia, PA 19122.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board. You may talk to them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu for any of the following:

- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the present study is to learn more about the experiences of academically talented undergraduate black women inside and outside the classroom at a predominantly white urban university. Historically, much of the higher education research focused on how college affects students and how they develop their personal or racial identity during their undergraduate experience. This research study uses interviews to uncover how high-achieving black women in college – whose perspectives have been overlooked in earlier studies - make meaning around their experiences.

How long will I be in this research?

We expect that you will be in this research for about 75 - 180 minutes: the background questionnaire takes about 15 minutes and the in person interview is 60 - 90 minutes in duration. After the interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review it in person during at least one 30-60 minute follow-up interview. The overall study will last about six months. The study will conclude once questionnaires and interviews have been completed with twelve to sixteen participants.

How many people will be studied?

We expect about twelve to sixteen people will take part in the research.

What happens if I agree to be in this research?

If you agree to participate in this research study, data will be collected from you in two methods. First, you will independently complete a 10 – 15 minute online background questionnaire. Next, you will have an in-person interview with the student researcher which is 60 - 90 minutes in duration. All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. After the interview has been transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review it in person during at least one 30-60 minute follow-up interview.

Interviews will be conducted on your campus or off-campus at a location and time based on your availability. This research will be done in spring 2016.

What happens if I agree to be in this research, but I change my mind later?

If you decide to leave this study, there will be no negative consequences and it will not affect your status in the Honors College. Your choice to participate or to withdraw is confidential and will not be shared with other participants or the Honors staff. If you decide to leave this research after completing any of the stages of data collection, contact the research team so that the investigator can remove your data from consideration in the study.

Is there any way being in this research could be bad for me?

There are no risks associated with this research. As with any study, your participation may involve risks that are currently unforeseeable.

Will being in this research help me in any way?

We cannot promise any benefits to you or others from taking part in this research. However, it is possible that reflection on your experiences inside and outside the classroom as part of the interview may be therapeutic for you.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

To the extent allowed by law, we limit the viewing of your personal information to people who have to review it. We cannot promise complete secrecy. The IRB, Temple University, Temple University Health System, Inc. and its affiliates, and other representatives of these organizations may inspect and copy your information.

To secure the data, all electronic files will be downloaded on a password-protected computer and stored in a private, password-protected folder on the student researcher's personal

computer. To protect your identity, you will be assigned a pseudonym in the transcripts and you will only be referred to by that name in the study final report. Legal names and any personally identifying or sensitive information about you will be kept separate from your data from the study.

Your choice to participate in the study will remain confidential and your real identity will not be shared with other participants, staff in the Honors College, or published in the final report. Results from this study, using pseudonyms only, may be shared with the director of the Honors College upon request and will be reviewed with the primary investigator.

Can I be removed from this research without my OK?

The student researcher or primary investigator in charge of this research can remove you from this research without your approval if you are determined to be ineligible for participation. Participants can be deemed ineligible if it is determined that they are not in the Honors College. In addition, once the twelve to sixteen interviews have been conducted, any additional responses to invitations for participation will be excluded from participation.

What else do I need to know about this research?

If you are interested in the results of the study, you may contact the student researcher via email at musu@temple.edu for more information in fall 2016 once the study has concluded and the report is completed.

Signature Block for Adult Subject Capable of Consent

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

Signature of subject	Date
Printed name of subject	
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
Printed name of person obtaining consent	

Code Book for Dissertation Research Adrianne Musu Davis

"Can't I Be Black And Smart?": Examining the Experiences of Black High-Achieving College Women inside and outside the Classroom

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*Classmates + Participation + Faculty INT: Classroom : Umbrella supercode for all classmate-related, participation, and faculty interactions within an academic classroom or other formalized learning space. Use for analysis of RQ 1 [Family Code]

*Context: Classroom COOCCUR Recommendations : COCCURrence of when the classroom context is mentioned as a part of general recommendations

*Discussion COOCCUR Context: Classroom : COCCURrence of when Discussion is mentioned/occurs within the context of the classroom

*Experiences & Situations: ALL + Context: Social/Campus : Collection of all the experiences or situations students described that occurred outside the classroom i.e. in campus life or other social environments.

*The ONLY one: CLASSroom Context : COCCURrence of The Only One code within the context of the classroom

Academic Activity : Umbrella code to describe any activities associated with coursework or major or college intellectual experience including but not limited to: registering for courses, studying abroad, preparing for class, etc.

Academic Activity: studying : Specific mention of studying among activities associated with coursework or major or college intellectual experience (including but not limited to: registering for courses, studying abroad, preparing for class, etc).
Academic Activity: <is part of> Academic Activity: studying

Academics: peer support : Student mentions helping others with academic coursework including but not limited to group work, keeping each other on task with assignments and homework, sharing work habits, etc. This may also take the form of encouragement or tutoring or other such activities.
Academic Activity: <is part of> Academics: peer support:: Support/Cope <is associated with> Academics: peer support

Admissions : Any discussion or allusion to the application process associated with the university or the honors college.

Career Plans : Any discussion of future professional plans for life after college. (Code based on student aspirations portion of interview protocol).

Classmates: Dynamic : Describes nature of interactions with other students who share academic classroom experiences with the student, in major, honors, or more broadly.

Classmates: Ethnicity :Refers to passages that mention the racial or ethnic or cultural background or "diversity" among other students who share academic classroom experiences with the student, in major, honors, or more broadly.

College Choice : Any discussion of the decision-making process for higher education. (Code based on interview protocol question). Admissions <is associated with> College Choice

Context: Classroom : Any events or situations described as occurring in an academic classroom or other formalized learning space (including online classes, faculty offices, recitations, etc).

Context: Social/Campus : Any events or situations described as occurring outside the classroom, such as in living environments, within the context of a student organization gathering or event, or in general non-academic spaces on campus or in the urban locale. Involvement/Activities <is associated with> Context: Social/Campus:: Involvement/Activities: Student leadership role <is part of> Involvement/Activities

Discussion : Situations inside or outside the classroom where participants engage in conversations or interpersonal communication.

DOC: Aisha : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Amber : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Anissa : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Crystal : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Grace : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Jacqueline primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Keshia : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Lauryn : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Mia : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Michelle : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Miranda : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Nicole : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Serena : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Shannon : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Shantel : primary documents associated with this participant

DOC: Zoe : primary documents associated with this participant

Employment/job : Refers to full or part-time work or job that the student mentions Jobs may include internships if described as such by the student. (Internships may also be included under involvement/activities or academic activity, depending on how the student refers to the internship's significance to her major).

Experience : Broad umbrella code for situations student mentions that are notable as they are associated with some aspect of their identities. May be an interpersonal interaction or overall sense/feeling something generally or in social media, and may not clearly relate to a specific time or event.

Experience: Offensive/ Biased/ PC language : Student mentions specific situations, often microaggressions or bias-related interactions with others, that are directly related to some aspect of their identities. This is especially related to the student's most salient identities. May be an interpersonal interaction or in social media, and does clearly relate to a specific time or event. Experience: <is part of> Experience: Offensive/ Biased/ PC language:: Offensive/ Biased/ PC language <is part of> Experience: Offensive/ Biased/ PC language

Experiences & Situations: ALL : ALL of the occurrences of the experience-related codes regardless of context: use for analysis of RQ 1 (Family Code)

Family : General talk about or reference to relatives

Family: Dynamic : Describes nature of interactions with relatives including nature of various relationships

Family: Expectations : Describes how relatives express their desires for or prescribed performance for the student in any area of her life.

Family: Financial independence : Describes how relatives express their desires for or prescribed performance for the student specific to her ability to support herself or be financially stable/successful (often after college).

Family: Nationality : Describes how relatives perform their cultural identities/ constructions of their family identity as associated with their nation of origin/heritage. This generally applies to families with defined roots in non-American countries such as the West Indies or parts of Africa.

Feeling Different : Situations or allusions to sensing a difference – negative or positive – in how others treat or interact with the participant in comparison to her peers. May also relate to specific interactions or situation where participant directly observed differential treatment. May also describe participant's sensitivity to various aspects of her identity in various contexts.

Friends: Activities : Generally describes things the student does with peers or friends including places she goes outside the classroom.

Friends: Dynamic : Generally describes nature of interactions the student has with peers or friends outside the classroom including describing their closeness, significance of relationships, etc.

Friends: from home : Generally describes interactions/relationships with peers or friends from high school or anyone they met pre-college and still communicate with at college..

High school : Any discussion of pre-college learning experiences, particularly related to interactions in secondary school inside or outside the classroom. (To maintain separation of concepts and timelines, this will also include interactions or observations with classmates and teachers during the secondary school period as well).

Honors: Enhance : Describes ways to make the honors experience better OR alludes to issues or concerns with honors with or without offering solutions. Honors: Experience (The) <is part of> Honors: Enhance:: Recommendations <is associated with> Honors: Enhance

Honors: Experience (The) : Broad umbrella code for any references or allusions to being in the honors college or program, particularly at college. This code includes references to various perks, requirements, academic activities, spaces, or other general aspects of the honors program. (Has limited application to discussion of pre-college honors/gifted academic activities as well).

Housing/Living Environment : Mentions interactions with roommates or experiences that occur within a residence hall or living environment.

ID: Academically Talented : Mention of this term, which is commonly associated with honors students.

ID: Assumptions : Mention of how a person is expected to act or embodies the various aspects of a particular or combination of their identity descriptors. Can be applied when a person's performance is in contrast or unexpected based on associated social norms, personal expectations, and the various contexts to which the student alludes in the passage.

ID: Ethnicity/Culture : Allusion or direct reference to social customs or behaviors associated with heritage or family background. (Closely related to ID: Race)

ID: Gender : Mention of this term, or allusion or direct reference to social constructions of being female (or male or other identifier).

ID: Gifted : Mention of this term, which is commonly associated with honors students.

ID: High-Achieving : Mention of this term, which is commonly associated with honors students.

ID: Honors : Broad umbrella term for identities or experiences associated with being a member of the honors program or college. Often used with specific mention of this term as an identity descriptor.

ID: Identity Performance : Mention of how a person acts out or does the work of embodying the various aspects of a particular or combination of their identity descriptors. This performance is associated with social norms, personal expectations, and the various contexts to which the student alludes in the passage.

ID: Intersecting ID : Description of performance or mention of more than one identity descriptor as coocurring or overlapping. Students may compound identity terms, illustrating their mutual impact of each other in how the student constructs those particular identities for herself or as portrayed in society or various contexts.

ID: Nationality : Describes cultural identities/ constructions or identity descriptor as associated with nation of origin/heritage. This generally applies to students with defined roots in non-American countries such as the West Indies or parts of Africa or such notable references to peers or friends in a variety of contexts.

ID: Political : Mention of this term, or allusion or direct reference to politics, philosophies about government or how society functions. Most specifically refers to political parties or ideals.

ID: Race : ID: Ethnicity/Culture <is associated with> ID: Race
Mention of this term, or allusion or direct reference to social constructions of race/ group classifications based on skin color and origin, especially Black, white, multiracial, among others.

ID: Salience of IDs : Discussion or allusion to the relative importance of membership in each or multiple identities in various situations or contexts.

ID: Sexual Orientation : Mention of this term, or allusion or direct reference to social constructions of sexual or romantic attraction to other people or related identifiers, including but not limited to straight, gay, lesbian, queer, questioning, and trans among others.

ID: Smart : Mention of this term, which is commonly associated with honors students.

ID: Social Class : Mention of this term, or allusion or direct reference to differences or indicators of participants' or others' economic background or income levels.

ID: Spirituality : Mention of this term, or allusion or direct reference to organized or informal religion or belief systems.

IDentity : ALL of the occurrences of the IDentity related codes: use for analysis of RQ 2 (Code created from IDentity family)

Interactions : Umbrella code to include nature of communication or interactions of the participants with others in their social or academic environments. Interactions: Faculty <is part of> Interactions :: Context: Classroom <is associated with> Interactions: Faculty :: Interactions: Staff <is part of> Interactions

Interactions: Faculty : Describes nature of communication or interactions with instructors and professors in formal or informal academic spaces. :: Context: Classroom <is associated with> Interactions: Faculty

Interactions: Staff : Describes nature of communication or interactions with advisors and other non-faculty in formal or informal non-classroom spaces.

Involvement/Activities : General discussion or allusion to student participation in events, activities, or student organizations at college. Involvement/Activities: Student leadership role <is part of> Involvement/Activities

Involvement/Activities: Student leadership role : Direct reference or allusion to instances of student participation where participant has a leadership role such as membership on an executive team or an organization.

Involvement: ALL : All instances of student involvement, leadership, and employment as reflective of a collection of participants' outside the classroom activities [Family code]

Offensive/ Biased/ PC language : Experiences or interactions that involve specific language the participant or the researcher describe as offensive, prejudiced or biased.

Participation : Describes nature of performance or interactions in an academic classroom described as (choosing to - or not) engaging with others or in classroom activities

Recommendations : Discussion or allusion to ways the university or other organizations can improve aspects of the student experience.

Recommendations: Faculty : Collection of all discussions or references to improvements overlapping specifically in ways instructors or university can improve aspects of the student experience inside the classroom or in other academic spaces.

Represent / Good Impression : Discussion of concerns about or illustration of student's sense of tension between her own individual behavior as a person and the expectation (from self or others) to make a good impression based on her portrayal as the model for students who share her identities.

Role model : Any discussion of people the participant looks up to or respects. (Code based on interview protocol question).

Silencing : Applied to situations where participants describe not to speaking up – whether by choice or perceived lack of welcome, participate or be her full self in various contexts or interactions with others.

Social Issues : Student mentions news, pop culture, and local /national/international situations associated with society. Often refers to systemic issues (i.e. racism or patriarchy) or timely social movements (i.e. black lives matter or police brutality).

Social Issues ALL : Umbrella supercode for all Social Issues code family.

Social Issues: Activism : Student mentions taking social action associated with any number of issues in the news, pop culture, and local /national/international situations associated with society. Often refers to systemic issues (i.e. racism or patriarchy) or timely social movements (i.e. black lives matter or police brutality). May relate to protest in person, social media behavior, boycotting, or bringing

awareness to mentioned social issues. Social Issues <is part of> Social Issues: Activism

Social Issues: direct ref : Student directly mentions/describes a particular news, pop culture, and local /national/international situations associated with society. Often refers to systemic issues (i.e. racism or patriarchy) or timely social movements (i.e. black lives matter or police brutality). (Based on interview protocol section).

Social issues: Disconnect : Student mentions news, pop culture, and local /national/international situations associated with society and expresses not feeling a part of these movements or a separation from the cultural/ethnic/racial identities associated with them. Also used when notable connections to the social issues are mentioned, to build analysis of how students perceive the issues. Often refers to systemic issues (i.e. racism or patriarchy) or timely social movements (i.e. black lives matter or police brutality). Social Issues <is part of> Social issues: Disconnect

Social Issues: Reax : Student shares personal or friend or community reaction to news, pop culture, and local /national/international situations associated with society. Often refers to systemic issues (i.e. racism or patriarchy) or timely social movements (i.e. black lives matter or police brutality). Social Issues <is part of> Social Issues: Reax

Social media (Context) : Any discussion of interactions or situations described as occurring in a virtual or online platform such as on Facebook, YikYak, among others.

Support/Cope : General umbrella capturing any mention of behaviors or activities describing how student gets through a situation or challenge. Applies to any context: social/campus or classroom. (Based on interview protocol section)

Support: ALL forms : Collection of all mention of behaviors or activities describing how student gets through a situation or challenge using family, friends, or general coping strategies [Family Code]

Support: Family : General umbrella capturing any mention of behaviors or activities describing how student gets through a situation or challenge. Connects support or coping activities to family members. Support/Cope <is associated with> Support: Family

Support: Friends : General umbrella capturing any mention of behaviors or activities describing how student gets through a situation or challenge. Connects support or coping activities to friends or peers. Support/Cope <is associated with> Support: Friends

The ONLY one : General umbrella capturing any mention of behaviors or activities describing how student gets through a situation or challenge. Connects support or coping activities to friends or peers. Support/Cope <is associated with> Support: Friends

University culture : Direct reference to the nature of the environments or people at the college. This includes broad descriptions or references to the way systems at the institution function, the kinds of students that attend, and the tone of events or activities at the college.

Working Hard : Direct use of this expression or an allusion to needing to put in work or effort. Can be applied to a variety of social contexts.