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AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE HONORS COLLEGE EXPERIENCE AT  
THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the Department of Higher Education  
The University of Mississippi

by

JENNIFER L. PARSONS

May 2019

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study examines a problem of practice and its context within equity, ethics, and social justice. Nationwide, African American students represent a small percentage of all students enrolled in an honors program or college. This study explores the experiences of African American students who are members of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi. Understanding the significance of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency will yield ways of enhancing the honors college experience for its African American students as well as staff being more knowledgeable regarding more productive recruiting practices thereby enriching the learning environment of all stakeholders within an honors college as well as society-at-large.

DEDICATION

For Arielle and Nakiyah

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACT American College Testing

AY Academic Year

CPED Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate

DiP Dissertation in Practice

GPA Grade point average

HBCU Historically Black Colleges and Universities

HoCoMec Honors College Minority Engagement Club

MOST Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent

NCHC National Collegiate Honors Council

ONSA Office of National Scholarship Advisement

PoP Problem of Practice

PWI Predominantly white institution

SMBHC Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

SAT Scholastic Aptitude Test

UM University of Mississippi

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am most grateful for the eighteen students who graciously agreed to be interviewed for this study. They are remarkable human beings. I appreciate their time, patience, and insight, and I care most about how this paper is received by them.

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## I. THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

## **Identification of the Problem of Practice**

The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC) at the University of Mississippi (UM) has an African American population of approximately 3% of its 1,500 honors students. The Problem of Practice (PoP) explored herein is better understanding the honors experience of high-performing African Americans for the purpose of increasing the number of African American students in the SMBHC. While the terms “high-performing” and “high-achieving” are used throughout scholarly literature, the term is used to distinguish high-performing African Americans from at-risk or underperforming African Americans, who are characterized by a variety of factors such as having a low GPA. Henceforth, the term “high-performing” will be implied when discussing African American students enrolled in the SMBHC. While the overarching goal of this qualitative study aims to give voice to the African Americans in the SMBHC, the desired effects of this work will result in the SMBHC staff being equipped to enhance the honors experience of African American students, which will in turn inform the staff on improving practices for recruiting those students.

Ideally, this study’s impact will increase the number of African American students in the SMBHC, thereby impacting the overall quality of UM, since the university will benefit from attracting and retaining African American students who might otherwise attend an Ivy League school. As the literature indicates, UM will better support its current African American students when more African American students are matriculating into the predominantly white institution as well as will foster an inclusive yet intellectually diverse student body, which will benefit the entire UM community (Dahlvig, 2010; Fischer & Massey, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002).

## **Local Context and Professional Setting**

Founded in 1848, the University of Mississippi is the state's flagship university, which achieved status in the group of R-1: Doctoral Universities—Highest Research Activity by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education in 2016. UM has more than 24,000 students, which includes all UM campuses,<sup>1</sup> almost 60% of the student body are Mississippi residents, and 22.9% of students are non-white. The total Oxford and regional enrollment of African American students for Fall 2017 equaled 2,667 students, including 2,273 undergraduate students, or 12.5% of the total undergraduates enrolled. For Fall 2017, approximately 54, or around 3%, of those 2,273 African American students were members of the SMBHC (see Table 1; all tables and figures are located in the List of Appendices).

As its mission states, the SMBHC prepares citizen scholars who are fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions (The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, 2018, website). Members of the SMBHC admissions committee are comprised of three staff members and eight faculty members. For the 2018-2019 entering class, the SMBHC received over 1,300 applications for 420 spots. For the same entering class, the mean ACT score is 31, and the average GPA is 3.97. Applications are evaluated holistically and are comprised of standardized test scores, unweighted GPA, a listing of extracurricular activities, including employment, volunteerism, and leadership, a personal statement, and two essays. Given the holistic approach, the SMBHC has declined admission to students with ACT scores as high as 36 and accepted those whose ACT scores are as low as 20.

In order to graduate from the SMBHC, students must achieve an overall GPA of 3.50, complete a set number of volunteer hours per semester, and earn at least 30 honors hours. Six of those honors hours are achieved through Hon 101 and Hon 102: Honors Freshman Seminar,

taken during the students' first year and required of all first-year honors students. Academically, this interdisciplinary seminar is structured to expand students' critical thinking skills and hone their writing ability. The courses are divided into units: The Identity of the Self, Self and Society in Honors 101; Self and the Cosmos and Self and Nature in Honors 102. All sections have some core readings, and each section is required to have both journal writing and a minimum of twenty pages of formal writing. These courses count toward the freshman composition requirement, or alternatively, toward humanities and social science hours if the student already has composition credit.

Briefly, other honors courses may be categorized into three areas: general education courses, special topics, and courses for special programs. For example, a student may take a general section of a fine arts course, partially fulfilling his general education requirements, or he may choose to enroll in an honors section of a fine arts course. Special topics courses typically change from semester to semester and have included courses addressing water security, the World Cup, and history in video games. Some honors classes tie in with students' post-graduate plans. For instance, honors juniors may take a law class at the UM School of Law and receive undergraduate, honors credit for that class. All honors courses average 15 students per class, with the exception of honors chemistry, which averages 45 students. SMBHC students complete capstone work culminating in a written thesis in partial fulfillment of the expectations laid out to graduate as an SMBHC scholar.

Primarily, the SMBHC is funded by a single endowment and supported by the University. Discussed later in this manuscript, the SMBHC affords opportunities to its students that UM's general population do not have. For example, students have the option to take many of their general education courses as honors, and they find themselves at a table with fourteen of

their peers and a professor who knows their names. The seminar-style class most often takes place in SMBHC rooms; the rooms are small and barely accommodate the fifteen to seventeen students in the class. The Hon 101 and 102 courses are taught by faculty representing a variety of disciplines. There are approximately 27 faculty teaching Hon 101 and 102, and of those, only two are African American (see Table 2). Currently, there are twelve staff members, only two of whom are non-white (see Figure 1). The twelfth staff member, an African American male, joined the SMBHC on November 30, 2018.

### **Scholar-Practitioner Background**

On July 2, 2018, I was named Interim Associate Dean after serving the SMBHC as Assistant Dean since July 2015. In my current role, I oversee communications and development, and I share academic advising responsibilities with the other Associate Dean. For communications, I am the editor of the annual Honors Report, which averages 55 pages and circulates among over 6,000 constituents. I also manage the SMBHC website, social media accounts, and weekly e-newsletter. For the area of development, I solicit funding for the honors college, identify potential donors, and handwrite thank you notes. Although I am assigned to over 1,000 honors students for advising, I do not meet with all of them as meetings with me are not mandatory. I encourage students to meet with me, but inevitably, I have a couple dozen who come in regularly, and others who may only meet with me once or twice during their undergraduate careers. Others I correspond with frequently via email. While I advise students on the standard fare of upcoming course selection, change of major talks, and professional aspirations, I spend many of my meetings talking with students about their overall college experience, meaningful ways to spend their free time, and the best ways to maximize their breaks from the university. Once or twice a semester, I will have a student drop in with a Title IX



matter, and regularly, I meet with students about a variety of issues, including family dynamics, depression, stress, anxiety, or loneliness.

Before I became Assistant Dean in July 2015, I served as Academic Counselor for the SMBHC for almost seven years. With the exception of a temporary move to Alabama, I have been employed by the SMBHC for ten years. My first position with the University of Mississippi was in the Office of the Registrar as Senior Transcript Clerk quickly followed by Senior Records Clerk. It was during my employment there that I pursued and earned my master's degree in higher education from UM. I completed my graduate assistantship in the formerly called Academic Support Center, where I co-wrote text for the EDHE 105 courses. Although I have been employed outside of higher education, I have been in higher education in some capacity for over twelve years.

Although I have been encouraged to apply for jobs in other areas at UM as well as other higher education institutions in other states, I have remained loyal to the SMBHC for ten years for a number of reasons. I believe in the mission of the honors college. My colleagues are inspirational in a variety of ways. I admire and respect the dean, whom working for and with has been an utter joy. For the most part, the students with whom I interact are ambitious, smart, and driven; they motivate me to be well-read, motivated, and alert. I enjoy being part of the maturation process for students. For example, I am fascinated by the freshman who begins doubting everything about his upbringing, and over a four-year period, begins deciding on his own tenets of living his life based upon what he has learned in and outside of the classroom as well as acknowledging his childhood and the way he was reared. The conversations I have with colleagues, students, alumni, and other SMBHC stakeholders prove rich and forward-thinking time and time again.

For all of these reasons and more, I awake almost every morning ready for the challenges of the day. Being around others who are smarter than I am fuels my brain. The opportunities the SMBHC affords to its students and the stories they bring back from studying abroad, classrooms, and summer breaks encourage me to think of ways to better serve the students so that they are experiencing college in an intellectually stimulating way. To increase the diversity within the SMBHC is a goal I want to help achieve, inspired by the numerous conversations I have had with honors students over the past decade. If I thought my place at the SMBHC meant nothing, and if I believed that the SMBHC stood only for a line of recognition on a transcript, then I know I would have moved on years ago.

The SMBHC does not exist for a mere gold star on a résumé. Likewise, the desire to increase the number of African Americans in the SMBHC is not appealing for the sake of reaching a strategic vision's numerical goal. Explaining why African American students comprise only 3% of the SMBHC student body requires a frank discussion about issues addressed in UM's higher education doctoral program: equity, ethics, and social justice. The way in which I grapple with such issues, especially as they connect to my PoP, most closely relates to an interpretive philosophical stance, whereby I find value in exploring the meaning behind social constructs. I believe there are systemic barriers that hinder African Americans from being accepted into the SMBHC, and alternatively, I believe there are practices utilized by the SMBHC's admissions committee that, although not intended, could be seen as favoring a bleached student body. While I admit there are valid assertions made by positivists, I do not believe that quantitative data presents a full and intricate picture of any given dilemma. With an interpretive philosophical stance, I propose that the reasons why African Americans choose not to apply to the SMBHC, do not know about the opportunity to apply, or do not seek mentors

within the SMBHC cannot be explored through only known and observable facts. A sliver of my philosophical stance relies on a critical worldview because I remain curious about any conclusion reached. Overall, though, I believe my interpretive stance keeps me focused on conducting qualitative research. I cannot ignore the appeal of making the two-dimensional numbers of admissions, enrollment, and retention data come alive through qualitative means.

I grew up in Oklahoma, where I learned extensively about the Trail of Tears but was exposed to no more than a footnote about the Civil Rights Movement. In ninth grade, I watched the film *Schindler's List* for an English assignment. I created a portfolio of poetry, prose, and short stories written from different perspectives of those involved in World War II. As a freshman in college, I watched *American History X*, a film about a neo-Nazi who is sent to prison for murdering two African American teens accused of trying to steal his vehicle, and in prison, the neo-Nazi has a heart shift and wants to prevent his younger brother, who idolizes him, from following in his footsteps. Such an overt message forced me to consider the subtle displays of racism some members of my family practiced while growing up. For example, my late father always remarked that he was not racist, yet he forbade me from dating an African American saying, "Blonde girls who date Black boys earn a certain reputation." When I secretly dated an African American boy in high school, he and I had a conversation a few months into our relationship. In short, his parents did not want him dating a white girl, and soon after that conversation, we ended our relationship.

The above are merely snapshots of moments in my life when issues of race and ethnicity either quietly existed or suddenly took away my breath as I attempted navigating a treacherous time: adolescence and young adulthood. Even today, I have moments of utter confusion that racism exists at all. I have never understood the existence of slavery. Its history and current

state make me question humanity in general. For the sake of brevity, these are truncated examples, but hopefully, they provide insight into why my PoP means so much to me. Personally, I am drawn to my PoP because of my past experiences in and outside of the classroom, including the way in which I was raised. I have been influenced by conversations, films, and music. I am affected by the confusing messages sent by adults during my childhood, and even now, I muse over words such as tolerance, heritage, rights, history, monuments, etc. as they relate to topics of race. Unavoidably, these personal experiences have impacted the way I view my career, and in part, how I consider my career as part of my identity and the kind of person I want to be.

I have worked at the SMBHC for ten years now. During this decade, I have had many individual conversations with African American students in the honors college. In our conversations, I have heard them say, “I thought I was selected because y’all needed more Black people,” and “I don’t think I deserve to be here; I’m not as smart as my peers.” Additionally, African American students have confided that they sometimes feel uncomfortable, discouraged, or lost when they walk into a room of only white students and a white professor. They are chosen to be the “token” African American student, speaking on behalf of an entire race. We have discussed the pressure of that expectation. We have discussed the disservice of that onus, both to the African American student and the white professors and students. For all of these reasons and more, I want to understand how the SMBHC can best recruit African Americans and enhance their honors experience so that they feel they belong and that they have earned the spot next to their white peers.

Admittedly, I hold many assumptions about my PoP. I assume that increasing the number of African American students in the SMBHC will foster richer conversations among

students in their honors, seminar-style courses. I assume that honors African American students will benefit from the variety of opportunities afforded to SMBHC students that are not otherwise available to the general UM population. I assume that inviting current African American honors students to recruiting events at high schools where the population is predominantly African American will encourage those high school students to apply to the SMBHC in greater numbers. I assume that current African American students in the SMBHC would appreciate having mentors from a pool of African American SMBHC alumni, and the feeling expressed by the African American alumni would be mutual. In part, these assumptions are based upon the work of the leading, qualitative researchers regarding African Americans and their honors college experiences, which purport that African Americans need other African Americans alongside them (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Of course, the way I keep my personal background, philosophical stance, and assumptions in check is to adhere to measures that will affirm the trustworthiness of my study, including credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Professional Goals and Motivations**

Imagine giving an answer in class that everyone will digest as the truth, and there exists no one else in the classroom who can counter the assertion or confirm the statement. In their study of the African American undergraduate experience, Harper and Newman (2016) found that “students of color experience higher levels of racial stress, receive less validation of their academic competence, and encounter significantly more academic and social adjustment challenges than do their white peers” (p. 3). Honors colleges are perpetuating this observation when they do not ensure their non-white students are afforded the opportunity to sit alongside another non-white student in the classroom. If not the classroom, then efforts to create a

communal feeling among minoritized students within an honors college must be the least honors colleges should offer.

Furthermore, increasing the number of African American students in the SMBHC would benefit the white honors students, as well. For example, white students coming from a predominantly or all-White high school would not mistake a singular African American opinion for how all African Americans view a given issue. If honors classes averaged even two African American students, then a white student would be able to understand that those two African American students could have stark differences of opinion on an issue; hopefully, this fact would dissuade the white student from making general assumptions about an entire race. This sharing of ideas among a more diverse honors class could, in turn, impact the entire UM campus. Many student organizations at UM are led by honors students. If honors students are having richer conversations in their honors classes, then they are bound to be more open-minded, creative, and kind when debating policy changes and procedures within their given UM organizations. Acquiring this skillset could benefit them in the post-graduate world and strengthen society-at-large.

When I talk with an African American student who shares her discomfort with being the spokesperson for her race in an Hon 101 class, I think of what the honors college is doing to ensure that we are recruiting African Americans to the SMBHC as well as offering an environment in which they feel challenged for reasons other than the color of their skin. The SMBHC Dean and I have talked over the years regarding our desire to increase the racial diversity of the honors college, and other colleagues and I have discussed ways to alter the admissions rubric and recruiting practices. Based upon my discussions with current students, I felt compelled to initiate a club within the honors college specifically for non-white students.

This idea proved popular among approximately thirty of our non-white honors students, and the club formally actualized and held elections in fall 2018. More on this club will be shared in Manuscript III. However, discussing the lack of diversity and creating a club for non-white students are not enough.

Being intentional about recruiting African Americans must be a priority. The SMBHC can no longer travel within Mississippi to “feeder” high schools like Jackson Preparatory and Madison Central High School—schools that are predominantly white. Additionally, the SMBHC admissions committee must explore how the rubric may be jeopardizing the fate of a minority applicant based upon unproven or arbitrary measures of success. These examples are supported by the scholarship discussed later in this dissertation. For example, in their study on admissions percent plans, Cortes and Lincove (2016) found that “a priori admissions information can vastly improve minority access to college quality by encouraging eligible students to apply to, and more importantly, enroll in more challenging institutions” (p. 349).

### **Personal and Professional Assumptions**

During summer 2017, I wrote my professional philosophy of education for an assignment in Edfd 707: The Professional Philosophy. I will share a portion, since it has bearing on my personal and professional assumptions of this manuscript’s PoP. Before sharing, though, I will include a section of a case analyses and response portfolio I wrote for a class during the same summer term. For Edci 703: Seminar on the Learner and Learning, I delved into seven case studies presented among many in *Perspectives on Learning* (2009), a book that tackles theories of learning by Plato, John Dewey, John Piaget, and numerous others. By offering a reflective narrative on learning, teaching and curriculum, and my personal philosophy, how I view this manuscript’s PoP will come into focus.

I believe learning begins in the womb. Science journalist Annie Murphy Paul writes an entire book on this claim, and she asks the reader to consider that “for many centuries people have believed that there is continuity between the individual in utero and the individual in the world; now there is solid evidence that this ancient belief is correct” (2010, p. 9). As I am shaped by my environment (i.e., food, air, water, sunlight, soil, pollution, climate) I am shaped also by the decisions I make within that environment. Although a fetus makes no decisions, it is subject to its carrier’s decisions and environment, including what the woman eats and drinks and what illnesses, addictions, or diseases she may have.

I believe that continued brain development depends upon the nature and nurture presented to the child at the moment of birth. Consider a preterm baby whose physicians and nurses encourage the parent to hold the baby skin-to-skin. Consider the orphan whose need for physical touch is evident in the rocking, back-and-forth motion he exhibits alone in his crib. Numerous studies confirm that in utero factors as well as parental interaction with infants affect cognitive development (Bernier et al., 2016; Filippa et al., 2015; Wassenaer-Leemhuis et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2017).

Similar to classical theorist Plato, I believe that “knowledge is innate” (Phillips & Soltis, 2009, p. 10) in that *something* [emphasis added] is present in the mind at birth. However, I believe the potential for learning begins at conception. Unlike Plato, I believe one can learn something that does not come naturally or innately to the person. I do not believe “if one does not previously know something, one cannot learn it now” as Plato contended (Phillips & Soltis, p. 11). British philosopher John Locke developed his theory of learning on the concept of an infant being born with a mind “that was completely devoid of content” or “a blank tablet” also known as a “tabula rasa,” although he did recognize that the “human infant is born with certain



biologically preformed abilities” that “lie dormant” (Phillips & Soltis, p. 13). I find John Locke’s tabula rasa theory hard to swallow because even if knowledge is not yet demonstrated by an infant, I believe the potential to demonstrate knowledge is present. As a behaviorist would point out, learning is taking place when a baby sucks his finger or when he follows a bright object with his gaze. Furthermore, while John Piaget observed interesting stages of cognitive structures, I do not believe that the age ranges he gives for each are applicable to all. Piaget believed that children construct cognitive structures through four stages: Stage 1 (birth through 2-years-old): sensorimotor stage; Stage 2 (2-years-old through 7-years-old): the preoperational stage; Stage 3 (7-years-old through 11-years-old): concrete operations; and Stage 4 (11-years-old through 14-years-old): formal operations (Phillips & Soltis, pp. 42-43). Additionally, I agree with Lev Vygotsky, who recognized the Piagetian stages but proposed the “zone of proximal development” to show that children of the same stage could have different potentials for further learning (Phillips & Soltis, p. 57). In other words, two children with the same IQ and within the same Piagetian stage eventually may differ depending upon how much or if the children are “properly challenged or stimulated” with the “guidance of adults or older peers” (Phillips & Soltis, p. 57). I believe these potentials for learning are in some part based upon the social context in which the individual operates.

Individuals do not retreat to islands unto themselves in order to learn. Even Tom Hanks’ character in the film *Cast Away* sought human interaction by creating Wilson, a volleyball with whom he conversed as a way of keeping his mind alive and alert. Humans need other humans. Humans learn from other humans. Yes, I believe in the power of solitude and individual reflection, but like Dewey, I believe that “the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals” (Dewey, 1897, p. 80). I also

believe that “the knowledge people create is heavily influenced by their interpretations of their experiences and their positions within particular social, economic, and political systems and structures of a society” (Banks, 2011, p. 150). In other words, I understand von Glasersfeld warning that we have “no grounds for believing in any form of ‘external reality’” (Phillips & Soltis, p. 50) in the same way I can appreciate Plato’s assertion that we should not take appearance to be reality (p. 11). This view can be explained through persons’ sundry religious beliefs. For example, how can two knowledgeable, Christian theologians disagree on the “right” denomination within Christianity? Do they have two different realities? Maybe. Is one more correct than the other? No. Both are crafted and informed in part by the culture in which the respective theologians came to be. As Phillips and Soltis point out, “The important point for our purposes is that culture interacts in very complex ways with learning” (p. 64). Is it a surprise when a person born into a Muslim family stays a Muslim as an adult? The angle we interpret facts and envelop information into our minds is shaped by the environment in which we are born and live, including the schooling we receive as children and young adults.

When my eldest daughter was in first grade, she had a classmate who was “unruly” and would fidget in his chair. Every week, I would ask my daughter how that particular classmate behaved, and she would report back with “in trouble again” or “not so great.” On one particular day, it snowed briefly, and the boy jumped out of his seat to catch a glimpse of the snow, a rarity in Mississippi. His teacher reprimanded him. What lessons are taught in this example? What does my daughter learn? What does her classmate learn? Has the teacher effectively managed her students?

In his pedagogic creed, Dewey shares his beliefs on the nature of method in the classroom, whereby he asserts the following:

I believe that the active side precedes the passive in the development of the child nature; that expression comes before conscious impression; that the muscular development precedes the sensory; that movements come before conscious sensations; I believe that consciousness is essentially motor or impulsive; that conscious states tend to project themselves in action. I believe that the neglect of this principle is the cause of a large part of waste of time and strength in school work. The child is thrown into a passive, receptive or absorbing attitude. The conditions are such that he is not permitted to follow the law of his nature; the result is friction and waste. (Dewey, 1897, pp. 82-83)

Could the teacher in the aforementioned example have asked her students to bundle up and engage with nature? Might she have offered all of the children a moment of awe and wonder to gather at the window and watch the snow falling?

At the SMBHC, the bulk of our honors courses are offered as 100- and 200-level courses. The point of an honors class has little to do with difficulty and everything to do with the way the class is taught: around a table with fifteen honors students and a professor who knows their names and engages with them and the material in a meaningful way. Most 100- and 200-level courses offered by the University of Mississippi are lecture-based with many students in each section. Special topics courses offered by the SMBHC are often interdisciplinary and involve field experiences, whereupon students interact with new environments, resulting in words of their texts jumping off the pages and becoming three-dimensional with sights, smells, and textures.

On the matter of transfer of learning, Phillips and Soltis claim that “psychology is a science, and teaching is an art; an ‘intermediary inventive mind’ must link the two” (p. 77). When a student has a voice in the classroom, he can transfer those oral skills to his first

professional interview. When a student engages with her classmates on questions of identity and society, she learns to navigate the world by interacting with those different from her with understanding and grace. A class's experience outside of four walls affords them opportunities to engage with a new environment, to consider perspectives previously unknown, and to transfer learning of water security, for example, to the issues ecologists, engineers, and economists face. Good teaching matters. "Even when controlling for a host of student background and institutional characteristics," a study has found that the "majority of good teaching practice variables (...academic challenge and effort, and integrated ideas, information, and experiences) has a positive and statistically significant relationship to the formation of post-baccalaureate degree aspirations" (Hanson, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2016, p. 747). The latter equates to a more educated citizenry; the benefits are numerous.

Regarding curriculum, there is much debate over *what* [emphasis added] should be taught in primary, secondary, and collegiate settings. For the sake of brevity, I will offer my opinions on the curricula of higher education. The University of Mississippi believes in the importance and marketability of a liberal arts education. Consider a student majoring in civil engineering. If that student only took civil engineering classes, then she would miss enriching opportunities to improve upon her high school writing, which could prevent her from writing effective grant proposals; she would miss the chance to take history courses, which could cheapen her appreciation for a client renovating a landmark; and she might skip an elective like 3-D drawing or computer science, which could prevent her from executing flawless blueprints. The matter of how higher education educators and administrators ensure learning is taking place is a completely different topic that deserves its own paper. For the sake of this paper, I purport that the higher education curricula should entail a variety of courses, from philosophy to

accountancy, as well as numerous opportunities to engage with each other and various environments, whether through service-learning or interdisciplinary means.

How do humans learn? When does learning begin? How can knowledge be taught? What should be taught in order to maximize learning? How should one teach another? The beauty of these questions is that there is no definite answer. The space to explore and research these questions is infinite. That is what makes working in higher education incredibly exciting.

I imagine the matter of learning and living and the theories that address them to be mapped out as a campground. Various members of society pitch their tents and kindle their fires. Each fire represents a theory on learning and living. Each tent represents the culture from which the camper emerges. When we walk among the campground, we are walking within society. We roast marshmallows together. We puzzle over a fire snuffed out. We commune in the middle with art and fellowship and intellectual curiosity. My professional philosophy on education asserts that the campground functions most optimally when all stakeholders are present, when students engage with one another despite racial and cultural differences, when educators teach the importance of asking the right questions over obtaining the right answers, and when administrators provide essential resources for students to thrive by acquiring and increasing their competencies.

The gift of higher education is knowing how to confront challenges, how to work with others, and how to engage with the various issues of our republic. The campground is our common area. Sometimes we retreat into our tents to experience quiet, to give our brains a rest, to reflect in solitude, or to be comforted by those who share the same experiences. At other times we reflect as a society by walking away from the campground's light to look above at the black sky, riddled with stars, representing creations and ideas we have not yet considered.

How can the SMBHC thrive as a campground populated by almost all white students? My assumption is that everyone wins—intellectually, personally, professionally, and emotionally—when students and professors from all walks of life are in the classroom. In his book *The Diversity Bonus*, Scott Page (2017) asks the reader to consider a classroom discussing the *Black Lives Matter* movement. It seems obvious to point out that the second classroom, wherein students representing a more diverse background in every sense, engaged in a richer level of civil discourse than the first classroom, consisting of predominantly upper-class suburban white and Asian Americans (Page, 2017, p. 130).

My hope is that the research I conduct will lay the foundation for understanding the experiences of African Americans in honors colleges. With this knowledge, I hope to collaborate with my colleagues to implement a plan to attract African American high school students to the honors college as well as ensure that—once attending—the honors college creates experiences inside and outside the classroom that will prove engaging and that will build a sense of community among all honors students. I know my assumptions sound idealistic right now, but I believe the answers are within reach, and I hope my research will lend itself to the right path.

### **Assumptions: Challenges and Changes**

When I first began collecting articles for my PoP, I expected to find many qualitative studies of the African American experience in higher education, especially under the key words “high-performing” and “honors college.” I have been surprised at what little qualitative research has been initiated on behalf of African Americans and their honors college experiences. When I consider critical race theory and Claude Steele’s stereotype threat along with imposter syndrome, I am overwhelmed with the importance of trying to understand the African American honors

college experience at PWIs.

In a pilot interview I conducted as an assignment for Edrs 704: Foundations of Qualitative Research Method in spring 2018, I interviewed a bright, friendly, utterly affable, and lightning sharp African American honors student. However, she still experiences apprehensions and self-doubt, especially when she finds herself in a room full of other smart—but white—peers and professors who look to her for answers about race-related questions at best and reassurances that all is well at worst. Herein exists the daily pressure she endures. In one class meeting, my interviewee struggled internally with the subject matter of race relating to how far people perceive our progress toward social justice, equity, and ethics. While she fielded questions resulting from the class reading *Ghosts of Mississippi*, she wrestled internally with acknowledging strides humanity has made towards racial reconciliation while simultaneously remaining cognizant of how much more work remains. How might my interviewee react to a white classmate proclaiming, “This is how it was back in the day, but it’s not like this anymore”? In his discussion of *Fisher v. University of Texas*, Donnor notes that “racism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, discursively speaking, operates surreptitiously and subliminally” (2016, p. 351). This undercurrent is what my interviewee refers to as “tiptoeing,” and I see how her reluctance to speak up for her race is partially due to her desire to “keep the peace” and “not rock the boat” (Student A, personal communication, April 6, 2018). In the pilot interview, she expressed fear of being perceived as the “angry black woman,” and this fear has stopped her from making certain comments in class (Student A, personal communication, April 6, 2018).

To date, what I have found through my literature review and doctoral classes is that research tells us that the biggest support honors colleges can give students like my interviewee is having other African American students in the class (Fries-Britt, 1998, p. 563). This seemingly

small observation exists as one of the main motivating assertions in my PoP. As expressed by my interviewee, her reluctance and apprehension about being the spokesperson of her race in a classroom where she is the only African American student is almost identical to Fries-Britt's and Griffin's (2007) study that found African American students prefer "to feel a sense of control over what they wish to share rather than feeling like there is pressure for them to take on the role of 'educating' white America" (p. 522). Other scholars echo these assertions and are discussed in the next section.

Therefore, I am adamant about pursuing more racial diversity within the SMBHC, and I would be naïve to think that a handful of white administrators could figure out the best route without the significant input and reflections of my pilot interviewee and her African American, honors peers.

### **Contextualization of the Problem of Practice**

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an estimated 20.4 million students attended American colleges and universities in fall 2017, and between 2000 and 2015, the percentage of African American college students increased from 11.7% to 14.1% (2016). In its report of admissions, retention, and completion of member institutions, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) released descriptive statistics on the percentage of African American students enrolled in honors colleges and programs across the nation from 2014-2015 (see Table 3). Of the NCHC member institutions, African American students represented an enrollment of slightly over 11%: far higher than the 3% of African Americans enrolled in the SMBHC (2016).

Kimball (2014) offers a dense commentary on the history of liberal arts colleges and how, overtime, the number of liberal arts colleges has dwindled while the number of honors



programs and colleges touting a liberal arts education has increased. Therein lies the problem: honors colleges and programs are selective, sometimes even more so than Ivy League institutions (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Kimball, 2014; Baber, 2012). Kimball warns that higher education institutions' commitment "to support honors programs devoted to the liberal arts college mission of fostering culture, community, and character" pose significant and complex issues given the persistence of "access to and diversity in higher education" (p. 260).

Once African American students are members of an honors college or program at a PWI, they are still susceptible to startling facts of all African American students at PWIs. For example, as Baber (2012) provides in his qualitative study on racial identity development and transitions to college, "among a cohort of students who began at a four-year postsecondary institution in 2003, 21% of African Americans dropped out three years later, compared to just 11% of white students" (p. 67). Baber believes that the importance of sound racial identity and the development of resiliency mark the critical take-home points of his study and help explain the disparity in attrition numbers between African American students and white students. Though this dissertation is focused on the experiences of male and female African Americans, "only one-third of Black undergraduate men who start college graduate within six years, resulting in the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups in U.S. higher education" (Harper & Newman, 2016, p. 3). These attrition rates are symptomatic of underlying issues, including how African American students perceive themselves and their surroundings in and outside of the classroom.

Several studies have shown that African American students face elevated levels of racial stress, undergo less validation of their academic competence, and confront more social and academic adjustment obstacles than do their white peers (Harper & Newman, 2016; Stewart,

2013; Tinto, 2012; Turner & Fries-Britt, 2002). If the SMBHC can better understand the experiences of its African American students, then the rationale would lead one to believe that the persistence of African Americans in the honors college will increase. For as Bowman, Park, and Denson (2015) point out, theories [by A. W. Astin and V. Tinto] emphasize how students who are more socially and academically integrated into college are less likely to drop out of college (p. 128). Likewise, this manuscript posits the more African Americans there are within the SMBHC and the more African American students feel further socially and academically connected to their honors experience, the more likely they will want to complete their undergraduate tenure as an SMBHC scholar.

While recruiting efforts are beyond the scope of this first manuscript but will be discussed in the third manuscript, it is worth noting now that admissions' rubrics for honors colleges and programs do have an impact on how many non-white students apply and are accepted. In their study on admissions percent plans, Cortes and Lincove (2016) found that "a priori admissions information can vastly improve minority access to college quality by encouraging eligible students to apply to, and more importantly, enroll in more challenging institutions" (p. 349). Additionally, "expanding access to more public information about what makes some colleges culturally and otherwise different from others would allow students to make more informed choices that engender few surprises" (Harper & Newman, 2016, p. 21). While merely a portion of the body of work covering recruiting of and admission plans for African American students, this glimpse is important to tuck away for future reference in the second and third manuscripts.

The leading qualitative researchers regarding African Americans and their honors college experiences purport that African Americans need other African Americans alongside

them (Fries-Britt, 1997; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). In one of their studies, Fries-Britt and Griffin found that “many of the students talked about the fact that they were still the only African American in a classroom, and they noticed the low numbers of minority professors they encountered on campus” (p. 514). Fries-Britt and Turner also found in their study that “students at the HBCU tended to describe interactions that cultivated their energy, whereas African American students at the PWI had their energy diverted from academics” (p. 517). Many of the apprehensions and self-doubt that commonly plague all honors students are amplified for African American students:

The challenges faced by Blacks by no means suggest that White students enter the classroom devoid of pressure or free of stereotypes. In fact, it is characteristic of most high achievers to feel a degree of pressure about their academic ability. In another study, we compared the experiences of high-achieving Whites and Blacks who were participants in an honors program. These data are still being analyzed, however preliminary findings suggest that both groups experienced a degree of alienation from peers because of their interest in academics. The difference in Black and White students’ experiences was the intensity and nature of the alienation. A key difference for White students is that they perceived that assessments made about their academic ability were aimed at them individually and were not applied to the larger community of Whites. [Black students] perceived that individual Blacks are assumed less intelligent precisely because they are members of the Black community, a community that historically has been perceived as less intelligent. (Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007, pp. 519-520)

In short, the body of research entailing qualitative research on minoritized college students’ experiences in honors colleges is sparse (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Guiffrida, 2004; Hurtado,

1997; Palmer, Maramba, & Holmes, 2011). Because the college experiences of African American students prove paramount in how they respond to a variety of decisions, from completing their undergraduate studies to how they interact with their peers, this manuscript's focus on African American students' honors college experiences is relevant and needed. As Gasman, Fluker, Commodore, and Peterkin (2014) posit, "Having insight into the experiences of honors students enables honors program administrators to understand the nuances of what makes their programs successful and the unique characteristics of honors students" (p. 554).

In an attempt to diversify its student body a decade ago, the SMBHC automatically began admitting any student who achieved valedictorian or salutatorian status of his or her high school. Automatic admittance did not guarantee any financial support by the SMBHC. This was ten years ago, and the SMBHC believed this new practice would encourage more non-white students to apply to the honors college. The rationale involved understanding that a high school student's GPA was the strongest predictor of student success in the first year of that student's undergraduate career. After a few years, the SMBHC discovered that many of the students who were accepted automatically were not successful in the honors college primarily due to the students' anemic writing skills. The essays are a critical section of the application, and if a student cannot write well, then they will not do well in the honors college. In essence, the admissions committee set up students for failure by automatically admitting the valedictorians and salutatorians whose writing lacked a basic understanding of crafting content and minding mechanics. Furthermore, basing our decision on class rank alone reduced those valedictorian and salutatorian applicants to one metric. As discussed earlier in this document, most recent attempts of keeping the African American students we have by creating a club within the honors college for non-white students has proved successful so far. Time will tell if the club is

successful at fostering a sense of kinship among the honors, non-white students.

Access and equity lead to a smarter citizenry. In an overview of higher education's history, Stewart & Colquitt, Jr. (2015) touch on how persons once viewed the purpose of higher education for African Americans. While some argued for practical job skills, others believed in the importance of a liberal arts education (p. 206). As aforementioned, as the number of liberal arts colleges has dwindled, the number of honors programs and colleges touting a liberal arts education has increased. Kimball (2014) warns that higher education institutions' commitment "to support honors programs devoted to the liberal arts college mission of fostering culture, community, and character" pose significant and complex issues given the persistence of "access to and diversity in higher education" (p. 260). Access requires African Americans clearing numerous roadblocks, including financial strains, standardized testing, and pre-college factors such first-generation status and lack of familial support to pursue higher education.

Interesting research conducted by Boatman and Long (2014) found that "need-based financial aid can have a positive effect on the outcomes of low-income students (...) [particularly] high-achieving minority students" (p. 678). Labaree's (1997) democratic equality framework encourages open access to all students who seek higher education, but as long as college has a price tag, marginalized populations will lag behind (p. 70). Haveman and Smeeding (2006) argue that America's colleges could be enrolling more moderate- and low-income students without sacrificing their selection standards, but students in the moderate- to low-income statuses are not as privy to the practices of college admissions committees nor are they as equipped as high-income students to handle the costs of higher education, much less be aware of possibilities of need-based financial aid. This commentary is critical to understanding why African American students may not seek entrance into honors programs and colleges in the

first place. Minoritized students will lack social mobility without knowledge of access points, so higher education institutions should stop reinforcing “generational patterns of income inequality” by finding ways to reach all students from all socioeconomic backgrounds (Haveman & Smeeding, p. 143). Boatman and Long (2014) found that “financial aid has positive effects not only on academic performance” but on behaviors supporting college triumphs and social benefits (p. 655).

In addition to financial aid issues, African American students must contend with stark facts regarding standardized tests. Standardized tests like the SAT and ACT do not predict academic potential or college success but measure gender, class, and race (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Luker, Cobbs, & Luker, 2001; McBride Davis, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2015), yet colleges and universities across the nation consider test scores a primary indicator of how well a student might fare through their collegiate career. Wiggan (2014) found that high-performing African American students do not place much stock in Advanced Placement (AP) exams or SAT scores, but they have learned to *play the game* [emphasis added] in order to move on to higher education. Wiggan recommends secondary schools consider shifting from an all-or-nothing testing culture to diverse measures of student assessments. Likewise, honors programs and colleges might snag more African American students if they considered the application holistically and prized insightful and articulate essays over SAT and ACT scores. The SMBHC offers small, seminar-style classes that afford students the opportunity to engage in civil discourse. The reading and writing demands are plentiful, and all of the required honors courses do not call for standardized testing but well-written papers.

Another angle worth contemplating regarding the PoP is pre-college factors (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). The influence of a father’s educational level, two-parent homes, and a father’s

emotional investment in his son's achievement are significant predictors of African American males' willingness to not only pursue high school honors courses but to complete them successfully (Hines & Holcomb-McCoy, 2013). For African American men and women, familial role models serve as encouragement for them to continue their education beyond high school graduation (Kane, 1994; Banks-Santilli, 2014). A successful mentor-mentee relationship encourages African American students to pursue higher education and dissuades them from underestimating their potential so that they apply to special programs like honors colleges. Whether a mentor is African American or not has little effect on the positive impact that mentor can make on an African American student. Even at a PWI, the importance of overcoming cross-race mentoring challenges as well as the critical objective of establishing connectedness between mentor and mentee cannot be denied (Dahlvig, 2010).

Understanding the dynamics at play between African American students and faculty and staff can benefit high schools as well as honors colleges and programs hoping to retain their African American population. When African Americans have access to and experience equity within honors colleges and programs, they become part of a smarter citizenry.

When a student becomes a member of the SMBHC at UM, that student immediately has greater access to networking opportunities, leadership development, and "real world" experiences prior to graduation. These facts make increasing the African American population at the SMBHC and other honors colleges and programs at PWIs even more critical. When African American students feel confident about their racial identity and have coping skills that enable them to advance amid perceived or actual threats, they are more likely to persist and graduate from higher education institutions (Baber, 2012; Jayakumar, Vue, & Allen, 2013). They can develop these skills through networking opportunities, which are available to SMBHC students

every week. The SMBHC brings a diverse body of guest lecturers and professionals who dine with honors students on an almost weekly basis throughout the academic year. When African American honors students have the opportunity to “sit at the table” with a successful African American, the benefits are immeasurable. Suddenly, that African American student sees the possibility of his or her future. Networking with campus visitors is important but increasing the diversity of faculty and staff is critical, as well. One study suggests African Americans may be reluctant to apply to honors programs and colleges if they lack a diverse faculty and staff (Fischer & Massey, 2007). Creating opportunities for African Americans to network with other African Americans is paramount to honors colleges and programs recruiting and retaining African American students.

Networking opportunities can give way to leadership development and “real world” experience. For example, an SMBHC, African American student took a required honors class during his freshman year. The course was taught by an African American professor who encouraged her student to consider “taking a chance” on his dream major: accountancy. Up until this conversation, he had underestimated his abilities to do well in the field of accountancy. The professor put him in touch with an accountancy professor. The student graduated this past spring with an accountancy degree, and since that initial conversation with his honors professor, he has interned with a top-four firm, served as a leader of several case studies assigned to in-class groups, begun his master’s in accountancy degree, and secured a career with a top-four firm. These milestones may not have transpired had the student not pursued the SMBHC and confided in his African American professor. Has everyone won in this scenario? The honors student graduated with a network of contacts that he can pass on to honors students younger than he. This student has engaged in “serious learning” that will “provide the human capital” needed



to “enhance productivity in all phases of economic life” as well as collegiate experiences for his future mentees (Labaree, p. 50). If honors colleges and programs want to make a lasting impact on the lives of African Americans, then they must recruit, retain, and graduate them.

An “honors education” is a prestigious title, but even more, it equates to a collection of experiences and opportunities to which the general population does not have access. Currently, African American students at PWIs take longer to graduate than their Caucasian peers and are more likely to drop out (Baber, 2012). African Americans may be positioning themselves against the odds when they limit their college choices by only applying to a single institution (Banks-Santilli, 2014). These facts block social mobility for African Americans, and honors colleges and programs have a unique challenge in fostering an atmosphere that encourages persistence of and offers resources to African American students. Climbing the ladder, breaking the glass ceiling, etc. will not occur for African American students overnight. Honors colleges and programs must devise a plan that considers a diverse student body and the ways in which each group therein can maximize his or her potential.

### **Proposed Theoretical Framework**

My proposed theoretical framework is better described as a theoretical hypothesis. I assert that the more African Americans in the SMBHC feel socially and academically connected to their honors experience, the more likely they will want to complete their undergraduate tenure as an SMBHC scholar. Based upon my exploration of scholarship on the topic and my own experiences as a professional in higher education for over twelve years, I contend that there exist three components to African American success in the honors experience: numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency. Arguably, the same might be purported for other minority populations, but given UM’s demographics and racially charged history, these components

specifically connected to African Americans are especially worthy of consideration.

### **Numerical Critical Mass**

Numbers matter. In the beginning of this manuscript, I present unsettling facts about the racial composite of the SMBHC student body as well as its honors staff and faculty. The SMBHC must reach some form of African American critical mass that will exceed its current 3-4% population (see Table 1). Numerical critical mass of African Americans must exist prior to access via the democratic process. Some will reach the honors college through merit while others will connect through prior networking. Some will identify a mentor who reckons with roadblocks and perseveres through financial calamities. Democratic equality is an open access pipe dream that does not exist in a state as poor as Mississippi. Critical mass must be present prior to democratic equality. The old adage of “there’s power in numbers” rings true here. When an honors African American student sees other honors African American students in the classroom, common areas within the SMBHC, and beyond, all students are empowered by the presence of one another.

### **Shared Identity**

Shared identity must be felt. African Americans who succeed must emerge out of a successful and supportive community. I believe one’s identity will serve as an umbrella term over the following factors: peers (other honors students; African American friends); mentors (church members, faculty, high school teachers and counselors); self-worth or a sense of validation that propels one to apply to the honors college, thrive in the environment, persist, and eventually pay it forward; and family (childhood, presence or absence of mother or father, extended family influences, first generation status). How is this shared identity measured? In my qualitative study, I will ask and evaluate the strength of each African American student’s

support network, and for further studies and analyses, I propose interviewing African Americans who dropped out of the honors college so that I may determine the strength of shared identity.

### **Resiliency**

The resiliency of African American members of the SMBHC must be present regardless of strong or weak administrative support. Achieving critical mass and shared identity depends upon the resilient spirits of African American students. These are the students who run with the idea of establishing a club within the honors college that represents non-white students. These are the students among a critical mass, along with a shared identity, who instigate momentum for success and vision for graduation. They demonstrate resiliency despite inequitable policies or views of various stakeholders.

The SMBHC prepares citizen scholars who are fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions. Becoming a citizen scholar fuels solutions to society's problems. We need more African Americans as citizen scholars, and we accomplish that goal when more African Americans are applying to honors programs and colleges and when more honors African American students are graduating after four years of incredible opportunities and access to networks they otherwise would not have been afforded. Access to opportunities changes lives. Changed lives influence policies. Policies have the power to break down systems of inequity and build up frameworks of social justice. When African American high school students matriculate to honors programs and colleges, they bust stereotypes, model possibilities to their younger peers, and positively contribute to society in remarkable ways.

Ultimately, I wonder if the interviews in my research will inform the kind of theoretical framework other qualitative studies on the same topic tend to generate. Instead of operating from a theoretical stance that informs the dialogue in the interviews, the information drawn from

the respondents may inform the theoretical framework. In other words, a grounded theory will manifest before my eyes and ears as I interview each of the African American students. In bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994), she contemplates the origin of theorizing:

I am grateful to the many women and men who dare to create theory from the location of pain and struggle, who courageously expose wounds to give us their experience to teach and guide, as a means to chart new theoretical journeys. Their work is liberatory. It not only enables us to remember and recover ourselves, it charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active, inclusive (...) struggle. (p. 74)

For now, I hypothesize that my theoretical framework consisting of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency will be confirmed through the process and analyses of the interviews, which will be discussed in Manuscript II. Therefore, in the end, I will have a grounded theory supported by my qualitative research.

### **Proposed Next Steps**

Two preliminary research questions drive the collection and interpretation of data to be gathered in my Dissertation in Practice. My research questions are:

1. What are the academic and social experiences of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC at the University of Mississippi?
2. How can the SMBHC enhance the academic and social experiences of enrolled African American students?

The working title of my DiP is *African Americans and the Honors College Experience at the University of Mississippi*. I am proposing a phenomenological qualitative study in which I will spend one-hour, one-on-one interviews with at least twenty African American members of

the SMBHC. In other words, I will be gathering narratives on the “lived experiences” of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC. Potential interviewees will be contacted by me via email, whereupon I will introduce my study with a letter of introduction, touching on the current African American population of the SMBHC and the desire to learn more from that population in order to make improvements for the overall betterment of the honors college. If they express interest, then I will email an Informed Consent Form to them, which will cover the purpose of the interview, risks and benefits, costs, confidentiality, and withdrawal without prejudice statements. The interviews will be approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Mississippi. Participants’ names will be disguised with pseudonyms, and no identifying data will be present in the drafts of nor final DiP document.

Interviews will be conducted in my office, located in the SMBHC, with the door closed and a *Do Not Disturb* notice taped to the door. When the participant arrives, he or she will read and sign the consent form, and once consent is confirmed, I will turn on my recording device and proceed with the interview questions. In anticipation of information worth further exploration, there may be additional questions depending upon the participant’s answers. I propose asking the following questions:

1. Who or what prompted you to apply to the honors college?
2. What has been most surprising about being an honors student?
3. What, if any, has been your greatest challenge in the honors college?
4. What has been the most comfortable aspect of being a member of the honors college?
5. How would you describe the honors college to your younger peers in high school?
6. How would you describe the honors college to your family?
7. If you could change one aspect about the honors college, what would it be?

8. What does being an African American member of the SMBHC mean to you?

The audio will be transcribed manually and entered into a data analysis program for analyzing content and identifying themes. Follow-up conversations will be considered as needed for clarification. All interviewees will receive a full transcript of their interview so that they may edit or expound on their original answers. My DiP advisor, DiP committee members, and the SMBHC dean and other colleagues will provide feedback along the duration of my research.

## II. DATA INTERPRETATION

## **Introduction**

Nationwide, African American students represent a small percentage of all students enrolled in an honors program or college. In its report of admissions, retention, and completion of member institutions, the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) released descriptive statistics on the percentage of African American students enrolled in honors colleges and programs in the United States from 2014-2015 (see Table 3). Of the NCHC member institutions, African American students represented an enrollment of slightly over 11% (2016).

The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC) at the University of Mississippi (UM) is no exception to this national dilemma. According to the United States Census Bureau (2018), the State of Mississippi has the largest percentage of African Americans, approximately 37.8% of its almost 3 million inhabitants, yet between 2010 and 2015, UM experienced an 8% drop in first-year, African American enrollment, which left UM's African American population at only 10% of the 2015 entering class (Kolodner, 2018). Furthermore, the SMBHC's African American enrollment, holding steady at 3% to 4%, is far lower than the average number of African Americans enrolled in honors colleges and programs nationwide.

### **Summary of Problem of Practice and Dissertation in Practice**

Given the reality of the African American population within the SMBHC, the Problem of Practice (PoP) explored herein is better understanding the honors experience of African Americans so that the SMBHC staff will be better equipped to enhance the honors experience of African American students as well as to improve practices for recruiting those students.

Explaining why African American students comprise only 3% of the SMBHC student



body requires a frank discussion about UM's higher education doctoral program's principles: equity, ethics, and social justice. The way I grapple with such issues, especially as they connect to my PoP, most closely relates to an interpretive philosophical stance, whereby I find value in exploring the meaning behind social constructs. Given this practitioner's positionality, the integrity of this Dissertation in Practice (DiP) relies heavily upon the students interviewed for this study. Their voices provide critical insight into how the need for numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency intertwine with the CPED first principles of equity, ethics, and social justice.

In Manuscript I, I hypothesize that the information drawn from the respondents in this study would inform the theoretical framework whose pillars are numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency. From the literature review discussed in Manuscript I as well as over ten years of experience working with students in the SMBHC, I anticipated a grounded theory emerging from the interviews and inevitably supporting the proposed pillars.

### **Research Questions**

This study addresses two research questions: What are the academic and social experiences of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC at the University of Mississippi, and how can the SMBHC enhance the academic and social experiences of enrolled African American students?

### **Definition of Terms**

*First-generation:* Although there are various definitions of first-generation students, this study defines the term as an interviewee whose parents or guardians did not graduate from a four-year higher education institution.

*Numerical Critical Mass:* While the literal definition of numerical critical mass is exactly

as one would presume, the nuance of the definition within the context of this study cannot be overstated. While this study does not suggest an ideal numerical critical mass, it does affirm that the ideal has not been met. This fact becomes evident in the data analysis.

*Resiliency:* The SMBHC lacks African American numerical critical mass, and due to the low number of African Americans, there are few occasions in which honors classes have more than one or two African American students present. This affects experiences of shared identity. There are those, however, who persist. These African American students bear the weight of speaking on behalf of an entire race. They must choose to speak up or remain silent when a white peer makes an ignorant comment about white privilege. More times than they care to admit, they must endure for the sake of graduating as a Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College Scholar. This determination, grit, and flexibility, in the face of ignorant, challenging, and hostile environments, define resiliency. Without resiliency, there is little to none persistence, completion, or triumph (Baber, 2012).

*Shared Identity:* Shared identity as it relates to African Americans and their college experiences is discussed widely in scholarly literature. However, no matter the various identities the African American students enrolled in the SMBHC bring to the table, shared identity in the context of this study implies the connection made between SMBHC African American students who at a fundamental level share two facts: they are African American, and they are members of the SMBHC.

### **Data Overview**

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Mississippi. A total of eighteen African American honors students were interviewed individually during October and November 2018. Of the eighteen students, four are males, and fourteen are females, and at least six students identified as first-generation. At the time of the

interviews, there were approximately 52 African American members of the SMBHC who entered into the honors college as freshmen. Therefore, this study captures 35% of that population. Because the overall SMBHC population of African Americans is small and confidentiality was promised, there will be no other identifying attributes of the participants beyond gender.

Interviews took place in the practitioner's office, housed in the SMBHC. During the interviews, the door was locked, and a Do Not Disturb sign was taped to the door. The interviews averaged 48 minutes and took place during the day, Monday through Friday. Participants were solicited by email (see Appendix E) from the practitioner, and a day and time for the interview were confirmed via email. Upon arrival, the interviewee read over and signed the Information Sheet and Statement of Consent (see Appendix F) along with the Release Form (see Appendix G).

Interviews were audio recorded with the practitioner's phone using the VoiceRecorder application. To remain engaged and attentive, the practitioner did not take written notes during the interviews but reviewed the audio recordings in the evenings and wrote down observations and reflections in a personal journal. All eighteen interviews were transcribed manually by the practitioner. Each interviewee had the opportunity to read through the transcribed interview and was given two weeks to respond with any edits. Out of the eighteen students, only three students tweaked a few of their original answers. Those edits were honored and included in the coding process.

The interview consisted of eight prepared questions (see Appendix H), and all interviews included several follow-up questions. Although not among the eight questions, there were a few follow-up questions that were asked of almost every participant. These will be brought up

in the Presentation of Findings section.

The web application Dedoose was utilized for coding over eighty, single-spaced pages of transcripts. Coding yielded affirmation of the proposed theoretical framework's three pillars: numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency. Additionally, the following sub-themes emerged: self-worth, awareness, recruiting, perception, comfort, preparedness, opportunity, belonging, and first-generation.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

A possible limitation of this study is that the practitioner is white. Even if this study were to be replicated with the same interviewees but conducted by an African American practitioner, the potential variations in answers could not be attributed solely to the practitioner's race as the interviewees might be in different seasons of their lives. However, the fact that shared identity is one of the major pillars of this study's theoretical framework yet is not present between the practitioner and interviewees is admittedly ironic.

Backyard research has its pros and cons, and the same is true as it relates to the limitations of this study. While the convenience of an SMBHC employee interviewing SMBHC students is clear, the access and familiarity of the honors college presented an ease during the interviews that may not have been present between a non-honors practitioner and honors students. Nevertheless, failing to mention the obvious utilization of backyard research would seem evasive.

Another limitation relates to the maturation process of any college student. The interviewees ranged from first-year students to seniors. Might this study yield different results had all of the interviewees been seniors? That is not only possible but probable.

The time of year the interviews were conducted may have had an impact on the outlook,

attitude, and overall disposition of the interviewees. A practitioner of a future, replicated study may consider conducting two interview sessions spread out over the course of an academic year.

While this study might be helpful to other honors colleges and programs throughout the nation, there are no two honors colleges that are identical. In other words, what may or may not work for the SMBHC will not be the same for any given honors college in the U.S. Some may view this fact as a limitation, but nevertheless, this study is worth submitting to the existing scholarship on minorities and their honors college experiences.

This study focuses solely on African Americans in the SMBHC. Because the practitioner does not interview other minority groups within the SMBHC, there exists no way of marking the commonalities and divergences between minority populations within the SMBHC. Although this study lends itself to many, future “spin-off” studies, there are groups of persons simply not interviewed for this particular study: SMBHC staff, faculty, non-white/non-African American students, white students, and African American SMBHC alumni. Again, these populations were omitted from consideration by the practitioner from the beginning planning stages of this study, but the absence of their voices is noteworthy.

### **Challenges of Data Interpretation**

This phenomenological qualitative study is as replete with subjective responses as it is with subjective coding of those responses. Although the practitioner combed through the transcripts numerous times, coded, decoded, and recoded, and consulted with colleagues, there still remains the strong likelihood that another practitioner coding the same transcripts might come up with distinctive coding variations. Despite this common occurrence in qualitative studies, there is no doubt that certain themes emerged during the coding process.

Two approaches were employed for the coding process. The grounded theory of this

study began as a hypothetical theory based upon scholarly literature and the practitioner's own observations and interactions over the past ten years. The three pillars of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency became coding categories as a way to test the strength of the hypothetical theory. This first approach was anticipated prior to the interviews. The second approach emerged during the coding process, when sub-themes were identified.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The participants in this study provided compelling and rich narratives about their experiences in and feelings about the SMBHC. These narratives affirm the scholarship on being an African American honors student. The presentation of this study's findings will be showcased within the practitioner's grounded theory that emerged after meticulous coding as well as a theoretical framework based upon the following: numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency.

### **Numerical Critical Mass**

This study found 61 excerpts directly related to numerical critical mass. The lack of numerical critical mass in the SMBHC affects the confidence of its African American students. Students coming from a predominantly African American high school had experienced an especially hard time walking into an honors classroom where they are the only—or one of two—African American students in a class of fifteen. Some students expressed despair while others shrugged their shoulders because they assumed they would be one of few African Americans.

For some, the tone is set from the moment they walk through the SMBHC doors. For example, the SMBHC hosts an Honors Welcome Week for all incoming honors freshmen. It is a week chock-full of activities and sessions ranging from belly dancing classes to information about major scholarships. During this week, the SMBHC posts headshots of the new honors

students in the lobby area, where many congregate and “check out” their new honors peers. Upon remembering that experience during her first week in the honors college, one student remarked, “I saw all of those pictures on the wall and thought, ‘Ahhh, here we go,’” because she viewed few faces that looked like hers. Another student had a similar experience at a Scholars Day, a campus-wide effort to attract high-performing students, many of whom apply to the SMBHC. When the student walked into the ballroom, he “noticed immediately” the lack of African American students: “I always look for other Black kids or any other kind of minority, and I only saw like one Black kid on that day. I thought that was kinda weird.” Scholars Day hosts hundreds of students and their parents.

Walking into an honors classroom proved disappointing or intimidating for some African American students. One participant simply said, “When I first walked [into an honors class], I thought, ‘I’m the only Black person.’” In fact, many participants spent several minutes talking about their experiences of being the only African American in a class like Hon 101, where students are asked to read and discuss books like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* or view films like *Ghosts of Mississippi*. Here is one student’s account:

I remember one time in Hon 101, I was shaking. I couldn’t even speak up because I was so nervous and couldn’t stop shaking because I knew I was gonna have to talk eventually. I couldn’t just let all of the white people talk about race. They were talking about slavery and justice. When I do talk, I like to say that this is my personal opinion, but I feel like sometimes some other people think I am talking for the entire race. So I want to make sure I clear that up when I do speak.

Some students talked about the overall pressure of being an African American student at UM and how that pressure is compounded within the honors college: “It’s hard to be Black on the

University of Mississippi campus. Period. But to add the layer of the honors college, where there is even less likelihood of there being other Black students in the classroom, puts even more pressure on Black students.”

Another commonality among the participants’ answers related to numerical critical mass involved apprehension about speaking up among white students who sounded different. This was a sentiment shared primarily by those students who came from predominantly African American high schools, although regardless of high school background, the participants connected to this apprehension on some level. For instance, one student “did not want to sound unintelligent.” The language her white peers used was unfamiliar to the student, and she went on to say, “Whenever I would write or speak [in high school], others would be like ‘Oh, you’re so good with words,’ but it’s not the same here. A lot of students have a sophisticated vocabulary, and they know how to use it.” Until her honors professor pulled her aside after class, the student had resolved to sit in class and not speak so that she would not risk “sounding stupid.”

When imagining having another African American peer in an honors class or experiencing the feeling of seeing another African American walk into the classroom, all of the participants in this study used the word “comfortable” or “calm” at some point. Imagining another student in her Hon 101 class, a student stated, “I definitely think it would’ve felt more comfortable. Maybe [I would have been] more willing to share (...) I feel like if you are the only African American in the room or only minority, there are certain things that people who are more privileged don’t see a certain way. So I definitely think there would have been less pressure.” Another student visibly became more relaxed and remarked, “I think that would calm me down a lot. I think I’d still be nervous, but at least, even if we don’t have the same viewpoints, there



would be another person who looked like me. That would help. I think that would make me more confident in what I was saying.” One student experienced both scenarios and had the following reflection:

It would feel good. It’s sad to say, but I would feel like I’m not alone. In my Hon 102 class, I was the only Black person in there, but in Hon 101, there were two other Black students, and it just felt comforting. It’s hard to explain. It just feels better than if I’m there alone. There are certain things that people can’t relate to unless they’re going through that same thing. I feel like that’s the part that’s most uncomfortable. Like if I speak up, then maybe they [white students] won’t understand it or just brush it off because they haven’t experienced the same thing.

Another student responded, “Not knowing how those other African Americans would act, but you know, being more comfortable to talk about things, definitely.” Alternatively, a student had experienced a rarity as she was one of four other African Americans in her Hon 101 class: “I think that’s maybe why I was so comfortable in that class. I don’t want to say I had ‘back-up,’ but I did, especially when we were talking about race and stuff like that. I had people who could relate to me.”

These excerpts only provide a snapshot of dense narratives relating to the importance of numerical critical mass. Within the 61 excerpts coded for numerical critical mass, students mentioned some variation of the word “comfort” more than fifteen times. Numbers matter.

### **Shared Identity**

In this study, excerpts directly addressing or at least alluding to the importance of shared identity numbered 124. For SMBHC African American students, the lack of shared identity plays out in ways that impact their time within and outside of the honors college. For example,

one student reflected on “African Americans as a collective” by explaining the following:

I haven't really thought about this to the extent that I have in other things I'm doing on campus. How like me being Black plays a role in a lot of things. Like every day, I'm thinking, 'Yes, this is gonna make an impact for so many other Black students on campus.' Like going to Black organizations and encouraging them to apply to other organizations on campus. That is something that is so tangible that you can say, 'Yes, this is huge.' Seeing people in a position like that. [Outside of the SMBHC] I wouldn't want people to think that I'm smarter than them. I'd rather be relatable. [Within the SMBHC] just knowing someone who has had the same life experiences related to race. Black people have similar life experiences. And there would be so much comfort in knowing that someone else would have the same experience. I found myself talking more in Hon 101 than in Hon 102. Because in 101, I felt to some degree that I was obligated to say stuff about race, that it was a teaching moment. That coincides with me coming to the understanding that I had something to contribute, like my voice was worthy and people should hear.

This passage highlights the weight of responsibility present when shared identity is missing. The student also shows how his experiences of shared identity outside of the honors college mean downplaying his identity as an honors student. Additionally, the passage addresses sub-themes of comfort, belonging, and opportunity. For example, the student sees his role in the honors college as an opportunity to provide a “Black perspective” for the white students, and he sees his role in African American organizations on campus as an opportunity to encourage his African American peers.

For some students, the lack of shared identity in honors classes caused frustration and

even anger as was the case for one student who noted, “Already being in a school where there are not that many African Americans in general (...) I was the only Black student [in many honors classes], and it made me angry because I felt like there was no one I could relate to or no one who would understand me.” The low number of African Americans leading to the absence of shared identity has impacted one student in the following way:

It’s already hard being an African American in the honors college because there aren’t that many of us even at the entire University. It feels filtered even more in the honors college. The honors classes are great here, and you want to take more than you need because they’re so great, but that also requires yourself in more situations where you’re the only African American, or you’re the only person who can give a perspective of an African American. So that puts a lot of pressure on an individual, especially if they’re a shy person or they don’t have a perspective that’s generally accepted or may not have an opinion at all.

Herein lies the conundrum of opportunity vs. comfort. Honors African American students risk their comfort for the sake of taking thought-provoking and interesting honors classes.

Shared identity creates an environment in which African American students feel more confident to engage with their white peers. When shared identity is missing, students may feel reluctant to participate in class discussion. As one student explained, “They [white students] could see that it wasn’t just my opinion because someone else would be there to corroborate my story in a way.” Many shared this sentiment, and when asked whether or not they thought white students felt any of this pressure to represent their race, the answers were obvious. One student directly stated, “No, and I think that’s crazy. It’s like a double-standard. No, I don’t.” One student gave an interesting account of experiencing a moment of shared identity but not feeling

pressured to speak up:

I do have a couple of incidences. There was one my freshman year, and somehow we started talking about slavery, and this girl made a dismissive comment like ‘Oh, I don’t see what the big deal is,’ and she kinda dismissed it [slavery]. And she was the only one. Like everyone else just kinda looked at her like ‘Why would you even say that?’ And there were only two African Americans—me and another female student. You could see everyone kinda looking around and looking at us [the two African American students] like what are we gonna do. But you know, everyone has their own opinions. I feel like I shouldn’t have to get out of my character to address people who don’t have one.

For others, simply knowing that another African American honors student was present in class was enough. For example, one student said, “You find an honors class that works with your schedule and you just hope [another African American student will be present] you know. So when I walked into Hon 102 and saw another Black person, I thought, ‘Oh, thank God.’” This student went on to say, “It’s just a relief as opposed to walking in and thinking, ‘Okay, I gotta watch what I say.’ It’s definitely a weight lifted off your shoulders.”

At the most basic level, there is power in experiencing shared identity for honors African American students. For many students, the lack of numerical critical mass and shared identity can be discouraging and exasperating, as one student straightforwardly explained:

I remember walking in on the first day of [an honors American literature] class excited because we were going to read Toni Morrison and all of these phenomenal Black authors. And I thought, ‘Aww, this is gonna be cool, we ‘bout to...’ And I remember that first day of class...it was all white people. I’m gonna be real, I left that class crying because I was like ‘Dang, I’m about to spend this whole semester talking about this stuff, and it’s

all gonna be on me,' you know? Not that they didn't have anything to offer to the conversation, but this is literature that I've dealt with and my grandparents have experienced. I got an A- in that class, and I wasn't mad about the grade, but I just didn't want to talk, and that [participation] was a big part of the grade. I had things to say, but I really was just—like I felt—like I didn't want to say anything wrong. I didn't want to say anything that was going to be misinterpreted or generalized.

These students know they will be seen, but will they be heard? Shared identity ensures that at least one person is listening. Given the many passages that could be included addressing the importance of numerical critical mass and shared identity, the excerpts that outnumber all others relate to how honors African Americans persist: resiliency.

### **Resiliency**

“At the end of it all, it was worth it.”

“I appreciate the things I've been through.”

“Making sure African Americans are taken seriously on this campus is important to me.”

“While I'm proving myself, I'm learning more about who I am.”

“Adapting quickly and efficiently.”

“Not that I want to fight them, but I do want them to hear my voice.”

“I'm doing it for me. I don't want to let myself down. I have a quote, 'Let's get it!'”

“I feel like I'm ready for the competition, and I will be more than qualified.”

“Like I know I have a high threshold, and some of my friends don't.”

Almost 140 excerpts directly connect to the importance of resiliency. Twenty pages of single-spaced copy reveal powerful and inspiring narratives from students whose tenacity have carried them through their UM and SMBHC experiences. For many, the participants in this

study exhibited resiliency when applying to the honors college. When asked who or what inspired them to apply to the honors college, one student replied, “I prompted myself.” Another student shared a similar response, “It was myself. I just wanted to be challenged in college. Nobody brought it up to me. I just decided to go after it myself.”

Others experienced pushback from relatives and friends. For example, some relatives told students, “Why are you going up there [UM]? You don’t need to go there. They’re a racist school. You’re gonna go up there and get hung.” Others were warned to “be careful,” and many were encouraged to attend HBCUs. Alternatively, some family members were supportive of students’ decisions to attend UM and apply to the SMBHC. As one student explained, “She’s [mom] proud of me working hard and being at Ole Miss. And the preconceived notions of Ole Miss when it comes to race [pause] to her it was like I was defying the odds.” Another mom encouraged her daughter to “keep pushing and keep going” in order to have a better life.

Resiliency is not void of self-doubt or insecurities. When asked what she would tell her high school peers about her SMBHC experience, she replied:

It’s comforting to know that I’m smart and I’m able to do it, but when I have my insecurities or my own doubts, I have other people there with me who are experiencing the same thing. I would encourage it [applying to the SMBHC] either way, but for the African American students I would definitely tell them to know that they will be the minority here, you know, but I don’t find that offensive or undermining. Use it to your advantage.

Another student remarked that being in the honors college has taught her to be strong and “have more self-confidence.” She goes on to say that “sticking it out has shown me that I can do it, and I can be better than people think I am. This is where you can make or break yourself.” Yet

another student admits facing challenges but demonstrates perseverance: “My greatest challenge is staying ahead. As a Black person in the honors college, I’ll be real, it’s hard to stay ahead. Sometimes I don’t make the same grades they [white students] do, and I feel bad. So my biggest challenge is just staying ahead (...) working two times harder.”

Even when students were applauded for their resiliency, they showed signs of self-doubt. For example, one student was asked a follow-up question searching for his opinion on why he thinks he was chosen to be an SMBHC member. He responded:

I don’t know because everybody in here was student body president like me. [laughter]  
So I know it’s not that. I’ve actually never thought about it. I always think I’m qualified to be in the room. I think my kind of imposter syndrome is like if I say the wrong thing it might expose me as a fraud. Like my answer doesn’t compare to theirs [peers]. I’m sure I belong in the honors college period (...) but I think I might be the bottom tier of honors students.

Other students expressed similar sentiments. Either they believed they should be in the honors college but were unclear on what, exactly, the admissions committee saw in their application, or they felt empowered to proceed through the honors college but, at times, believed they had to work harder than their white peers.

Time and again, sub-themes of awareness, perception, preparedness, opportunity, comfort, and belonging peppered the students’ narratives. These themes along with resiliency also played into how they want to be considered by others. One student mused:

This is tough because I want people to see me as Black, but then I would and I wouldn’t. Because there are stereotypes assigned to Black people. I just want people to see me as a person, you know? I feel like if I’m seen as Black first, then that means people will be

thinking about all of those stereotypes. Growing up in Mississippi, you always have to prove yourself. You always have to work twice as hard. Even my mom quit a job because other people kept getting job promotions even though my mom was more qualified and had been there longer, you know? Even in school, I always had to work ten times harder than the white person.

Some students even demonstrated resiliency in expressing how they want to be viewed by their families. One student talked about his persistence and determination as a way of gently pushing back against his parents' preconceived notions about how African Americans make it in higher education:

(...) to show them it's okay to not play sports. It's okay to read books and be smart. A recurring thing growing up was 'Why are you reading? Go outside and play ball.' Especially in high school. I don't have to play ball or do anything to be what's considered successful and Black. Because at my school, if you're Black and you're going to college, then you're playing football or basketball. That's like the way you go to school. You're either gonna go to a community college or you're gonna go straight to college playing ball.

Other students shared moments of being acknowledged for their resiliency. For example, one student's professor pulled her aside after class one day and asked how the student was doing in the honors college "because she [the professor] was personally disappointed in the low representation of African Americans and believed there needed to be more diversity. She was asking how it personally affected me. She realized that the pressure was greater for African American honors students especially."

Resiliency is a definite pillar of success for these African American honors students.



Support, or in some cases doubt, from family, friends, professors, and staff impact their drive to persist and succeed. One student articulated this observation:

I have found individuals that make up a makeshift family for me that have given me encouragement over these years. I have friends in the honors college who are African Americans, so they know my struggle and my home background. They share the same experiences. Sometimes it's quite hard for families to understand why you'd want to put yourself through 'four years of hell' when you might not get a job and you could get a job right out of high school as a construction worker or a C.N.A. [They don't understand why] you would go to a college where they require you to do more work or expect more of you as an individual. They don't understand why you'd even want to go to a college like that.

Finally, the students' resiliency inspires their younger peers:

I think that [being a member of the SMBHC] shows the freshmen and even high school students that this is something that they can do, too. Because I think a lot of times, African Americans aren't shown the honors college. I think it's gotten better, but just from different conversations I've had, African American students have told me, 'Oh, that's not for me,' or 'I wouldn't apply to the honors college even if I could go back,' but I think being in the honors college shows African American students that I can find my niche in this place. It might take a little while, but I can do it. I can share my struggle with them about staying or not. By staying, I show them that they can do it, too.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The entirety of the transcripts along with the excerpts discussed previously supports the practitioner's proposed theoretical framework and straightforwardly answer this study's two

research questions: What are the academic and social experiences of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC, and how can the SMBHC enhance the academic and social experiences of enrolled African American students?

While the first question is addressed through the narratives expressed under the themes of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency, the second question is answered via a variety of ways. One suggestion has been initiated already, which is the creation of the Honors College Minority Engagement Club, and will be discussed fully in Manuscript III. Another solution is working towards increasing the number of African American students in the SMBHC and intentionally showing that numerical critical mass benefits everyone. In a recurring follow-up question, participants were asked, “What is the benefit to white students when there are more African American students in the classroom, especially a class like Hon 101?” In analyzing all student responses to this question, the word “perspective” was used almost 40 times. The importance of perspective and particularly its impact in a seminar-style class is supported by the scholarly research. As referenced in Manuscript I, richer discussions leading to more learning occur in more diverse classrooms (Page, 2017). One participant gave an example of being in Hon 101 when a white student stated, “White privilege doesn’t exist.” When asked if that student might have benefited from having more African Americans in the room, the participant responded:

Unless you’re just obnoxious or rude or not trying to learn, then you can definitely learn from more African American students who would speak up in that situation. I think if there had been more African Americans in the class when the student made that comment, he probably wouldn’t have made the comment. But if he did, then it would probably be a little bit more back and forth to try to get him to understand. So I definitely

think that everyone engaging with others presents opportunities. Unless you're close-minded and not willing to have a different perspective. Because I started off with a certain mindset and certain beliefs, but you know, just talking about different things—I like transitioned or shifted. I know my opinion about certain things did change because I would think, 'Okay, that makes sense.' So I think it could help people be more open-minded.

There are numerous passages like this one, and all point to the importance of having “more” diversity, but certainly, achieving an ideal numerical critical mass is not the end goal.

Speaking to the CPED principles, one student's response highlights the importance of substance behind the numbers:

I think being inclusive should come first. The main goal is that everyone in the honors college—no matter race, gender, religion—we all feel like we're supposed to be here, and we have those important conversations, and we all educate one another. There might be some oops-ouch moments, but I feel like being inclusive is more important than diversity because you can have the numbers you want, but if no one's talking to one another, then it doesn't make a real difference.

How we talk to one another matters, too. Several participants gave accounts of what happened in uncomfortable or tricky situations during honors classes. While most students reported faculty members being supportive, respectful, and inclusive in and outside of the classroom, there were a couple of students who had unsavory experiences. For example, one professor noticed a student began crying in class when the topic of race was on the table, and the professor quickly switched the subject and never addressed the student outside of class.

Thankfully, this incident was one of only two reported during the interviews, although two professors not knowing how to handle a heated discussion on race, especially when only one

African American student is present, is two too many.

In short, the implications of this study point to the need for numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency regarding SMBHC African American students. Transpiring from this study is a grounded theory, which affirms the theoretical theory proposed and discussed in Manuscript I.

### **Summary of Study and Next Steps**

This phenomenological, qualitative study's Problem of Practice addresses understanding the honors experience of SMBHC African Americans. By analyzing over 20 hours of audiotape, this Dissertation in Practice has shown that numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency impact the persistence and success of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC. The respondents' answers also provided valuable insight into how the SMBHC staff can address matters of encouraging African American students to feel more welcome, important, and heard while pursuing their undergraduate education. Additionally, these insights offer solutions to recruiting more African Americans as a way to encourage numerical critical mass.

In Manuscript III, ongoing and upcoming measures addressing the PoP will be discussed and will include a rich commentary on improving SMBHC practices leading to equity, ethics, and social justice as they relate to the grounded theory developed in this DiP.

### III. IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION PLAN

## **Problem of Practice**

The leading qualitative researchers regarding African Americans and their honors college experiences purport that African Americans need other African Americans alongside them (Fries-Britt, 1997; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) reinforces that research by interviewing African Americans and studying their honors experiences at the University of Mississippi (UM). Beginning with a theoretical framework hypothesizing the importance of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency, the grounded theory established upon the completion and analyses of this study's interviews directly answers this study's primary research questions. First, what are the academic and social experiences of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC at UM, and second, how can the SMBHC enhance the academic and social experiences of enrolled African American students?

The SMBHC prepares citizen scholars who are fired by the life of the mind, committed to the public good, and driven to find solutions. This mission statement does not state, “ (...) prepares white citizen scholars” because that would be absurd. Why does the honors college at the flagship institution of the State of Mississippi, whose African American population is greater than any other State, have an African American population of only 3-4%? In order to understand the numbers, the SMBHC administration must understand the stories of those who have persevered.

If the Problem of Practice (PoP) is better understanding the honors experience of African American students so that the SMBHC staff will be more knowledgeable about how to enhance

the honors experience of African American students as well as how to improve practices for recruiting those students, then this DiP provides rich insight about and actionable solutions to the PoP. After careful consideration of the existing literature, a conceptual framework drove the questions asked during the interviews. After analyzing the responses, the framework evolved into a grounded theory, backed by scholarship.

Limitations exist. Due to the few number of African Americans in the SMBHC, this study does not disclose demographics of the participants beyond gender. While baring the details of the participants would enrich the content and provide greater insight, the participants could be identified easily, dishonoring the confidentiality agreements. The varied backgrounds and stories of these participants are striking, making the commonality of desire for numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency all the more poignant.

More limitations are discussed in Manuscript II; however, one is worth repeating. I am white. While I considered holding a focus group session conducted by an African American professor or administrator, I eventually omitted that idea, primarily due to concerns about breaking confidentiality. Nevertheless, I wonder if replication of this study by an African American practitioner would shake the foundation of this DiP's grounded theory, particularly the pillars of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency.

### **Summary of Findings**

What does being an African American member of the SMBHC mean to you? This was the last question asked of all interviewees. The answers to this question drive home the importance of enhancing the experience of African American students and assuring intentional recruiting practices. Out of the eighteen interviews, what follows are eight selected answers to the aforementioned question:

**Answer 1**

When I realized there weren't very many Black students [in the SMBHC], it just made me feel like I need to do well because it's important for the African American population. When a Black person fails, it's usually looked at as a failure for the whole race, whereas with white people it's more of a case by case basis.

**Answer 2**

I think there's a lot of privilege when you're in the honors college. Just having study spaces and not having to fight for somewhere to study. Or professors bringing food to class. Professors being so understanding. Having small classes. Now that the minority engagement club has started, it helps people in that club see that, yes, it is a privilege, but we belong here. Like we weren't put here to meet a quota. We're not tokens. We do the work. We're academically qualified to be here.

**Answer 3**

Being African American in the honors college means that we don't have to be the stigma that everybody thinks we are. We don't have to be the bare minimum. I think a lot of people think African Americans come up here because it's a party school. But being a member of the honors college has strengthened how I view myself and how I portray myself to the African American community. I try to be the showcase—that you can do it. People from home may tell you that you can't do it. But once you get to college, this is your life. This is where you can make or break yourself. And being in the honors college has taught me to be strong and have more self-confidence. Sticking it out has shown me that I can do it, and I can be better than people think I am.

**Answer 4**



That's a hard question. That's a really hard question. Honestly, it means Black people are capable of great things, and Black people can be offered the same opportunities that any other race of people can. Black people can and will achieve great things. Black people can be world leaders, and they will be world leaders. That honestly is what it means to me. It means I'm capable of doing great things. I feel like being in the honors college—I'm also an honors ambassador—going to the Junior Preview Day [at UM], I was able to show the Black boys and girls that they could do this, too. I saw a Black girl walk up, and she was like, 'I don't know if this is for me,' but I talked to her. And she told me that [at first] she didn't know if she could come to the table because she didn't see any Black people, and it made her a little nervous. So I had to let her know! Being a Black person in the honors college means being an example and showing other people that they can do great things, too. They don't have to be afraid.

#### **Answer 5**

It means that I need be an example for people in general—people in my hometown, my high school, my family. I know there's so much controversy about being a minority at Ole Miss, but the fact that I'm here proves to people that it's possible to be here. We may still have race issues, but it's not like I'm being forced out of here or anything. Me being here [and in the SMBHC] shows that this University has changed a lot. The only way we're going to progress is when we have more people like me here. When we have controversies, it sets us back. We have to address them, but we have to keep fighting and pushing. It's the only way we'll get closer to being a unified University. It's a big thing for me to be here. It's big for my family. I want to be that example for people.

#### **Answer 6**

It's special to me, I think, because there aren't many of us in the honors college. So to

think that the admissions committee saw something in my application to select me is cool. It means adversity. I don't know [pause] African Americans already have their small little pod, but in the honors college, it's even smaller, so even though the discussion-based classes are my favorite part, they can also be the hardest part because of the difficult issues we talk about. You might be the only one [African American] in the class, and people are still trying to learn that you can't speak for an entire race, and it's really odd when everyone looks at you like you're speaking for the entire race. So yeah, I think it means progress but still struggle.

### **Answer 7**

I feel like since there are so few of us, there is a certain responsibility. I feel like a lot of the African American students in the honors college are very involved like in BSU [Black Student Union] or ASB [Associated Student Body], and it's like you want to say, 'Hey! I'm in the honors college, and I'm succeeding, and you can, too!' I think a lot of African American students who aren't in the honors college think, 'Oh, I could never do that,' or 'There are too many white kids in there,' or 'I'm not smart enough,' but it's really just a mindset, you know? It means to me just shining my light and showing other Black students that they can do this, too.

### **Answer 8**

It means a lot. I feel like I have a nice pedestal because a lot of people want to hear what you have to say, and at the same time, you have to watch what you say because a lot of people are watching you. It's also exciting meeting other Black people who have the same ideas as you and want to see the same changes. I love being in the honors college. I get a lot of support. Just being able to have this interview could make a difference, you know? I wouldn't have the opportunity to do something like this. The honors college—I don't want to exalt it like it's God or something—but it is a great institution.

## **Improving Practices and Resources for Implementation**

The literature review in Manuscript I, the analysis of interviews in Manuscript II, and the discussion of findings in the present Manuscript III support the assertion that the SMBHC administration must enhance the academic and social experiences of enrolled African American students. As Manuscript I explains, all SMBHC stakeholders would benefit from increasing the number of African American students. As I posited in Manuscript I, we need more African Americans applying and coming to the SMBHC. The SMBHC affords its students unique opportunities that foster mastery in critical thinking skills, civil discourse, personal growth, and professional networking. These opportunities lend themselves to the CPED principles of equity, ethics, and social justice. Access to opportunities changes lives. Changed lives influence policies. Policies have the power to break down systems of inequity and create frameworks of social justice. When African American high school students matriculate to the SMBHC, they bust stereotypes, model what is possible to their younger peers and family, and positively contribute to society in remarkable ways.

On February 2, 2018, I held an interest meeting for those interested in establishing a club for minority students within the SMBHC. My hunch was that minority students within the SMBHC seldom came into contact with one another, and I suspected that many had no idea how many honors minority students were enrolled. Approximately 30 students showed up, and for many, that was the first time they sat at a table in the honors college with more than one person who looked like them. I began sharing numbers with them. For example, I expressed the discouraging fact that out of over 1,500 honors students currently enrolled, less than 300 are non-white, and of those 300, approximately 65 are African American. That was a sobering yet powerful moment.

In August 2018, the club officially announced its presence within the SMBHC. Calling themselves the Honors College Minority Engagement Club (HoCoMEC), they held elections and began work on programming. SMBHC Dean Douglass Sullivan-González agreed to grant the club the same budget as the Honors Senate: \$2,500 per academic year. To date, the HoCoMEC has hosted an ice cream social, where dozens of SMBHC minority students engaged with one another, and they have supported other organizations by showing up together. For example, Active Minds is a student-led organization at UM whose mission is to debunk the taboos of mental illness. Active Minds, along with the Black Student Union, held a painting party in a main room of the SMBHC that took place directly after the HoCoMEC's ice cream social. The event was a huge success, and the racial diversity within the SMBHC on that evening was inspiring. HoCoMEC held another evening event in November, when members of the club gathered in the SMBHC to decorate what they "hash-tagged" the #diversiTREE. Again, this was another moment that fostered shared identity and proved numerical critical mass is meaningful. The SMBHC will be wise in continuing the funding for the HoCoMEC.

October 2018 marked the first time that the SMBHC supported a staff member and four minority students to attend and present at the National Society for Minorities in Honors Third Annual Conference at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, AR. I took four honors students, who are either members or leaders within HoCoMEC and three of whom are African American, to the conference, where the president of HoCoMEC led a discussion on bridging the racial and cultural gap. While returning from the trip, the students expressed great interest in hosting the conference in 2020. The dean agreed, and this is another step in the right direction for increasing the number of African American students within the SMBHC. The conference is scheduled tentatively for October 2020.

Prior to July 2018, the SMBHC had not staffed an African American person for over three years. This past summer, the SMBHC welcomed back an African American woman who had been employed with the SMBHC previously as a secretary, and after working at a different department at UM, came back as an academic counselor and records coordinator. Rachel Coleman's presence has made a difference for our African American students. In a conversation I had with her one month ago, Rachel talked about an African American student stopping her in the hallway and being excited to see her. Rachel could not recall having met this student, and as she searched her memory bank for the student's name, the student exclaimed, "It's just so good to see someone here who looks like me!" (Student B, personal communication, Fall Semester 2018). Shared identity, even between a student and staff member, matters.

In November 2018, the SMBHC hired its first Associate Director of Development and UM's first African American development officer. Anthony Heaven has made a name for himself already, as anecdotally I can share that at least five African American students have contacted me about his hiring and how ecstatic they are to see an African American in that role, raising money for the honors college. They want to meet him, and now the program manager and I are planning a "Mingle with the SMBHC Staff" event for early Spring 2019 so that students can interact with staff members in the main room of our building. In a short amount of time, the hiring of these two African American persons has enhanced the honors experience of our African American students.

Partnering with other programs and organizations is paramount. The MOST (Mississippi Outreach to Scholastic Talent) Conference is a summer event, led by the Center for Inclusion and Cross Cultural Engagement (CICCE) at UM. The MOST Conference attracts rising high school seniors who are African American and interested in attending the University.

To date, the SMBHC administration has sent one or two representatives to dine with the MOST attendees at the last evening meal. The SMBHC must be more involved. Hosting tours, leading information sessions, involving the HoCoMEC leadership, and providing SMBHC brochures are only some of the ways the SMBHC can reach out to these students and encourage them to apply to the honors college.

Although welcoming African American students into the honors college from their first year of higher education is ideal, there are African American students enrolled at the University, but not members of the SMBHC, who may qualify for the SMBHC Junior Entry program. This program admits students who submit an application, have at least a 3.50 cumulative GPA, and possess 45 hours or more of college credit. Leaders and members of UM's Black Student Union, the HoCoMEC, SMBHC ambassadors, and others can be more intentional about encouraging African American UM students to apply for SMBHC Junior Entry. The SMBHC administration can also communicate our hope to attract a more diverse student body via the Junior Entry program by meeting with various stakeholders like those from UM's CICCE, Mississippi community colleges, and UM's Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Community Engagement.

During the week of December 10, 2018, two SMBHC African American students went back to their hometown of Clarksdale, MS. They were joined by two other alumni of that high school, and for five days, they led workshops on various topics relating to college, including financial aid, writing essays for college applications, and crafting an attractive résumé.

Clarksdale High School's (CHS) African American population is 99.13%, and according to the 2016-2017 annual report card by the Mississippi Department of Education, Clarksdale High School's accountability grade improved from an F to a D (2017). The honors students who conducted workshops are two of the SMBHC's most phenomenally bright students. They are

leaders on campus and have made names for themselves already at UM. The hope is that they inspire the CHS juniors and seniors to apply to UM and the SMBHC. The expectation is that the SMBHC will support more ventures like this one in the coming years. If the SMBHC can increase the number of applications from African American high school seniors, then the prediction is that more African American students will be admitted into the SMBHC.

As Interim Associate Dean, one of my roles is overseeing all communications. On behalf of the SMBHC, I manage accounts on Facebook and Instagram. The SMBHC's Facebook account is frequented mostly by SMBHC faculty, staff, students, and the students' families. The SMBHC's Instagram account is targeted towards current SMBHC students. Since taking over the account from the Honors Senate in March 2017, the account's followers have increased from 440 to 1,678 as of December 2018. The Instagram "stories," which are temporary posts, are viewed more than 800 times on any given day. I have been intentional about advertising various events hosted by other UM organizations, especially the BSU, and since its inception, I have highlighted the HoCoMEC.

With permanent posts that create the tone and look of the Instagram account, I am mindful of racial diversity with every post, and often times, the caption is as important as the picture. I have no shame in admitting that I have consulted with the Honors Senate Student Director as well as a few students, including African Americans, who have provided their input on how my idea for a post might come across to their peers. Intentionality is critical to ensuring all members of the SMBHC are valued. Communicating that the SMBHC administration cares about its students matters most. If the SMBHC wants to increase the number of African American students enrolled in the honors college, then we must communicate that desire while simultaneously being mindful of false advertisement. Therefore, overseeing the social media

accounts on behalf of the SMBHC is a role I take seriously.

While not included in this DiP, many students discussed their feelings about the UM administration and their reactions and policies towards current events on campus. While this paper does not expound on current campus events related to ethics, equity, and social justice, the interviewees clearly have given much thought to how some revere tradition even at the cost of marginalizing those who are in the minority already. Open dialogue about these events can and should be supported by the SMBHC. In the past, the SMBHC dean has led informal conversations about a variety of topics in the main common area of the honors building. The SMBHC must continue being a safe space for students to engage in civil discourse. Whether it be student-, faculty, or staff-led, the SMBHC has the physical space and mission statement to welcome all stakeholders to sit down for a discussion on current events, especially those that impact our minority students, and for the sake of this paper's purpose, particularly African American students.

Now that part of my responsibilities include supervising the SMBHC's Coordinator of Recruitment and Admissions, I am invested in analyzing where we recruit and what more we can do to attract African American high school students to the SMBHC. Exploring ways in which we can include our African American honors ambassadors to accompany the coordinator on recruiting trips without missing their classes is another challenge I am eager to embrace. Being physically present at high schools may not be the only answer. UM's Croft Institute for International Studies currently utilizes a software platform whereby current students engage with Croft alumni located all over the world. Similarly, the SMBHC might use technology to connect SMBHC African Americans with high school students. I also hope to work with the HoCoMEC on writing letters about their club to prospective students. As some of the



interviewees indicated, how they would talk about the SMBHC to high school students might depend upon whether the student is African American or white.

Communicating a consistent message is critical to recruiting African American students, as well. Making sure the admissions counselors housed in the Office of Admissions are answering questions about the SMBHC in the same way our recruiter does cannot be downplayed. For example, a common misperception about the SMBHC admission standards is that applicants must have a certain standardized test score to apply. That is false. Additionally, the SMBHC has found that even high school counselors are disseminating incorrect information. When one of this study's interviewees interacted with an admissions counselor from UM for the first time, the student inquired about potential scholarships at the university. The admissions counselor responded, "What did you make on your ACT?" That is the wrong message. While our website states our average standardized test scores of each entering class as well as the average GPA, it also states that there is no minimum ACT score or GPA required to apply. However, a single line on a website has not proven sufficient.

While many of the interviewees believed the professors handled uncomfortable classroom discussions in a respectable manner, there is no doubt that all humans house implicit biases. The Hon 101 and 102 faculty team meets three times a year over two mornings, and they discuss many topics, including a variety of issues related to their Hon 101 and 102 classroom experiences. I propose that the faculty invite the UM's Vice Chancellor for Diversity and Community Engagement to an upcoming meeting with the goal of learning how to best navigate a small classroom discussion on race-related topics as well as how to foster an environment that is inclusive. Prior to the workshop, the faculty might take an assessment, gauging their preconceptions and current practices. A post-workshop assessment measuring shifts in

perceptions might yield rich data that could prove eye-opening.

As an extension of this study, I propose meeting with administrators from other honors colleges whose programs face similar challenges regarding low African American enrollment. What has worked? What has backfired? If not sooner, then I hope to foster these discussions in Fall 2020, when the SMBHC plans on hosting the National Society for Minorities in Honors Sixth Annual Conference.

Establishing a mentoring program between SMBHC alumni and current students has been on the table for a few years now. Based upon this study's interviews, interest in establishing connections between SMBHC African Americans and SMBHC alumni who are African American is strong. As aforementioned, technology can be utilized to close the geographic gap so that students can interact with alumni who may be spread throughout the world. I intend on brainstorming with my SMBHC colleagues to bring this idea to fruition.

### **Dissemination of Findings**

I will be presenting portions of my research to the Honors Council in Spring 2019 as well as to the SMBHC Faculty Development meeting in August 2019. I believe honors faculty will benefit greatly from the insights shared by our SMBHC African American students, since numerous pages of transcription detail honors classroom experiences. I will be submitting a proposal to present my paper at the National Society for Minorities in Honors Fourth Annual Conference in Fall 2019 as well as at the 54<sup>th</sup> National Collegiate Honors Council Conference in November 2019. I anticipate several meetings with my SMBHC colleagues and interested UM stakeholders and administrators in the coming months, as well.

Several "spin-off" studies may transpire from this research. For example, I am interested in interviewing African American students who began in the SMBHC but did not complete their

undergraduate tenure in the honors college. Additionally, I am interested in interviewing the honors faculty and what challenges they encounter regarding race in their honors classrooms.

### **Practitioner Reflection**

I have many regrets in life, and one of my professional regrets happened years ago, when I was an SMBHC academic counselor and a particular student stopped by my office. She was in tears and asked if there was anything she could do to stay in the honors college. Her GPA had dropped below the minimum needed for her given year, and although I do not recall exactly how I replied, I remember giving her a short answer. I also remember not inviting her into my office to talk about the situation because I had other “pressing” matters occurring. I cringe thinking of that day. Had I invited her in, I might have learned about her background, including her high school experience, her family dynamics, how she has felt supported or discouraged during her collegiate career. I might have asked her about her major, her interest in pursuing it, her professional aspirations, and her self-perceptions of strengths and weaknesses. I could have told her, “You matter,” or “I’m glad you came to see me,” or “I can imagine how you feel, but let’s see if we can work out a plan.” I don’t remember her name or even her face, but I do remember that she was African American.

I made the decision to enroll in this doctoral program after lengthy discussions with my boss, colleagues, family members, and even internal conversations with myself. While I have enjoyed learning throughout my life, I wondered if my higher education days as a student had passed, especially since I have three small children. I felt frustrated, though. With each year in the SMBHC, I noticed that the number of African American students appeared to remain stagnant. Furthermore, I could not shake the feeling that the African American students who were enrolled in the SMBHC were not finding their “community” within the honors college but

outside of it. As I began considering the real possibility of applying to the program, I knew that if I was accepted, I would tackle these frustrations, among others related to African Americans and their honors college experiences, and figure out if I could help increase the number of African Americans applying to and enrolling in the SMBHC as well as strengthen their emotional connection to the SMBHC through intentional programming and other means.

Overall, my time in this program has made me a better writer and thinker, but more importantly, the program has inspired a confidence in how my professional decisions are made and how I ask the important questions of the day.

The doctoral program's focus on equity, ethics, and social justice should remain. While the program's professors have assigned interesting and thought-provoking texts and other materials, my best "schooling" came from my classmates, especially my African American peers, who provided such compelling viewpoints on any given topic. I cannot express articulately how my thinking has grown and my perspectives brightened due to the racial diversity of my classroom experiences. I am grateful.

### **Summary of Manuscript**

The Problem of Practice explored herein addresses how to enhance the honors experience of African American students. This PoP transpired from the low number of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC. This study operated from a place of two driving questions: What are the academic and social experiences of African American students enrolled in the SMBHC at the University of Mississippi, and how can the SMBHC enhance the academic and social experiences of enrolled African American students? These questions led to an extensive literature review that informed a theoretical framework, held up by the pillars of numerical critical mass, shared identity, and resiliency. This theoretical framework was affirmed

after an examination of this study's interview transcripts, whereupon the hypothetical theory became a grounded one.

Recommendations for improving the experiences of African American honors students, as well as encouraging African American high school students to apply, are discussed earlier in this manuscript and can be summarized by emphasizing the importance of intentionality by all SMBHC stakeholders. Whether through honors faculty workshops, advertising programming by HoCoMEC, or engaging the SMBHC student body in discussions about equity, ethics, and social justice, this paper surmises that there are plenty of avenues to engage the honors African American population thereby ensuring that their experiences are meaningful. We must acknowledge and applaud their resiliency. Their presence in and contributions to the SMBHC are irreplaceable.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The University of Mississippi's main campus is located in Oxford, Mississippi. Regional campuses of the UM system are located in Booneville, Grenada, DeSoto, Tupelo, and Jackson.

## LIST OF APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

Table 1. *Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College Statistics*

	<u>AY 2019</u>	<u>AY 2018</u>	<u>AY 2017</u>	<u>AY 2016</u>	<u>AY 2015</u>
Current Enrollment	1,590	1,512	1,420	1,257	1,267
Seniors	352	284	277	243	242
Juniors	431	376	306	299	279
Sophomores	389	423	363	313	322
Freshmen	418	429	474	402	373
<u>Demographics</u>					
	54% in-state	55% in-state	54% in-state	54% in-state	59% in-state
Residency	36 states	38 states	38 states	37 states	37 states
	12 countries	11 countries	10 countries	11 countries	9 countries
Gender	36% male	36% male	37% male	37% male	37% male
	64% female	64% female	63% female	63% female	63% female
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>					
White	1,375, 86.5%	1,328, 87.9%	1,249, 88.9%	1,107, 87.9%	1,052, 86.5%
African American	62, 3.9%	54, 3.6%	54, 3.8%	47, 3.7%	66, 5.4%
Asian Pacific	83, 5.2%	57, 3.8%	54, 3.8%	48, 3.8%	47, 3.9%
Hispanic	43, 2.7%	42, 2.8%	34, 2.4%	28, 2.2%	26, 2.1%
Two or More	22, 1.4%	27, 1.8%	27, 1.9%	27, 2.1%	24, 2.0%
American Indian	4, 0.3%	3, 0.2%	2, 0.1%	1, 0.1%	1, 0.1%

*Note.* AY = academic year



## APPENDIX B

Table 2. *Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College Hon 101 Faculty for Fall 2018*

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<u>Hon 101 Sections</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Discipline</u>
1	Male	White	English
2	Male	White	Modern Languages
3	Male	White	Modern Languages
4	Male	White	Journalism
5	Female	White	Modern Languages
6	Female	White	History
7	Male	White	Law
8	Male	White	Law
9	Female	White	History
10	Male	White	Political Science
11	Male	White	Mathematics
12	Female	African American	English & African American Studies
13	Female	African American	Law
14	Male	White	Law
15	Female	White	Classics
16	Male	White	Political Science
17	Female	White	Theatre
18	Male	White	Law
19	Male	White	Theatre
20	Female	White	Pharmaceutical Sciences
21	Male	White	Political Sciences
22	Female	White	Music
23	Male	White	Modern Languages
24	Male	White	Psychology
25	Male	White	Modern Languages
26-28 <sup>a</sup>	Female	White	Senior Barksdale Fellow

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<sup>a</sup>Three sections of Hon 101 and Hon 102 are taught by the SMBHC Senior Barksdale Fellow.

## APPENDIX C

Table 3. *National Collegiate Honors Council Statistics from 2014-2015*

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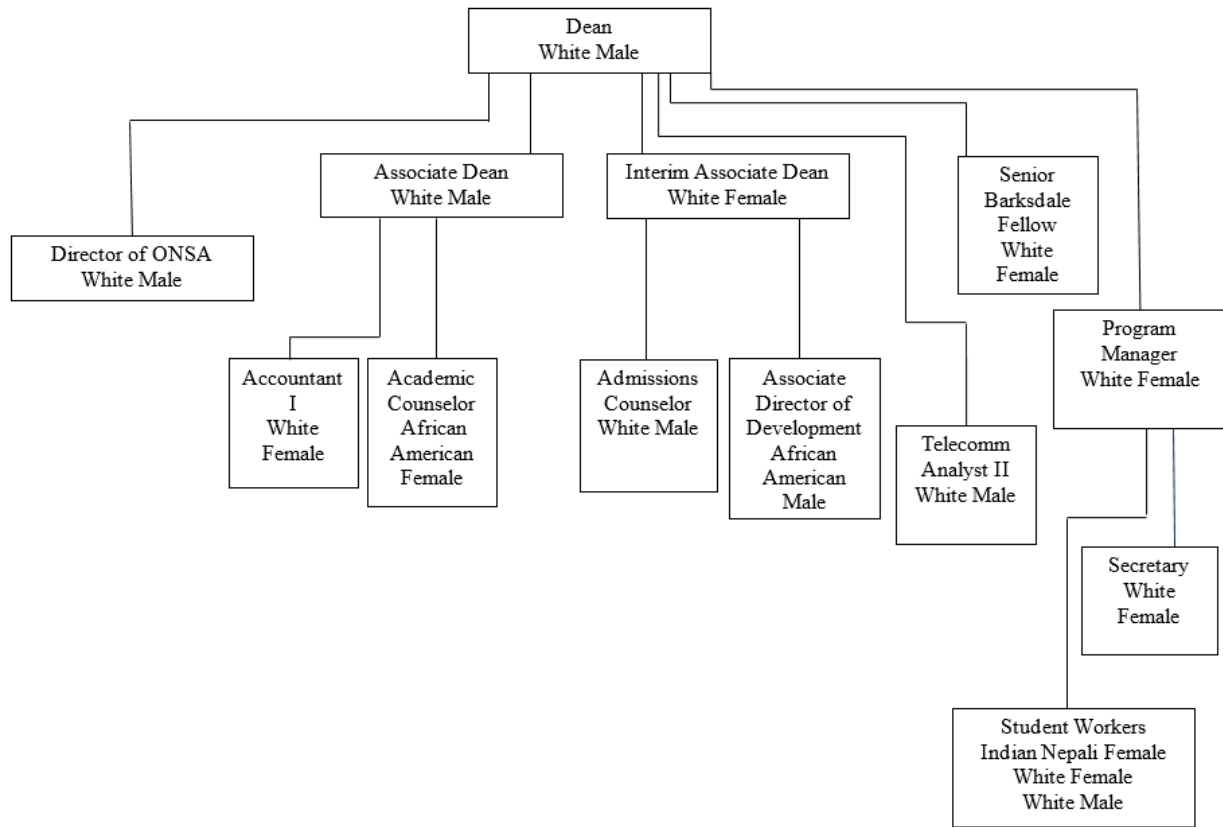
	N	Mean
<u>Institutional/Demographic</u>		
Honors Size (number of students)	224	451.69
Percent Male	165	36.18
Percent Female	165	63.78
<u>Honors Race/Ethnicity</u>		
Percent White	52	66.96
Percent African American	52	11.2

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*Note.* n = number of institutions reporting; Mean = average number of students and percentage of students. Adapted from “The Descriptive Statistics for Selected Variables from the 2014-2015 NCHC Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey of Member Institutions,” by the National Collegiate Honors Council, 2016. Retrieved from [https://cdn.ymaws.com/nchc.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/research/ARC\\_Summary\\_Table\\_of\\_Selecte.pdf](https://cdn.ymaws.com/nchc.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/research/ARC_Summary_Table_of_Selecte.pdf). Copyright 2016 by the National Collegiate Honors Council.

## APPENDIX D

Figure 1. Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College Organizational Chart for Winter 2018



Note. ONSA = Office of National Scholarship Advisement

## APPENDIX E

## Recruitment Email

Dear [Insert Student's Name],

I would like to interview you to glean insight into your experience as a member of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College. I believe your thoughts will help my efforts to write a dissertation titled: *African Americans and the Honors College Experience at the University of Mississippi*.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes and will take place in my office, SMBHC Room 333. The interview will be audiotaped, but you will not be videotaped. Your responses may be quoted in my dissertation for public consumption, but your name and any identifying attributes will not be associated with your responses. There is no compensation for participating in this interview.

If you are willing to be interviewed, then please respond to this email, and I will provide a link to sign up for a day and time that works best for you. At the beginning of our time together, you will be asked to read over and sign a few forms. You may withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Jennifer Parsons



## APPENDIX F

## Information Sheet and Statement of Consent

**Title:** *African Americans and the Honors College Experience at the University of Mississippi*

### **Investigator**

Jennifer L. Parsons, M.A.  
Department of Higher Education  
60 Sorority Circle  
The University of Mississippi  
(662) 915-1797

### **Advisor**

John Holleman, Ed.D.  
Department of Higher Education  
228 Guyton Hall  
The University of Mississippi  
(662) 915-7198

*By checking this box, I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.*

### **Description**

This study is exploring the experiences of African American students who are members of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi. Students will verbally share their experiences in and reflections of the honors college. You will not be asked for your name or any other identifying information during the course of the interview.

### **Cost and Payments**

Other than approximately 45 minutes of your time, there are no other costs associated with this interview. Interviewees will not be compensated with any type of payment.

### **Risks and Benefits**

There are no risks that are anticipated from your participation in this interview. However, you may become emotional recalling troubling or challenging thoughts are experiences. The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to freely express your thoughts on the honors college experience, whereby you may feel a sense of pride or accomplishment.

### **Confidentiality**

No identifiable information will be recorded, therefore we do not think you can be identified from this study. Audio recordings will be destroyed when the Principal Investigator graduates, which is anticipated to be May 2019.

### **Right to Withdraw**

Refusal to participate in this interview will involve no penalty, and you are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this interview at any time without prejudice. You are free to refuse any questions I ask. Your standing with the SMBHC will not be affected by your choice to refuse a question or discontinue the interview. Should you withdraw at any time, your decision to do so will be shared only among the Principal Investigator, Advisor, and committee, but even then, no identifiable information will be disseminated.

### **IRB Approval**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board

(IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the interview, I consent to participate in the study. I understand all aforementioned risks, benefits, costs, confidentiality, and withdrawal statements.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX G

Release Form

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI  
RELEASE

For valuable consideration, I do hereby authorize The University of Mississippi, its assignees, agents, employees, designees, and those acting pursuant to its authority (“UM”) to:

- a. Record my participation on audio tape (“Recordings”).
- b. Use my name, likeness, voice and biographical material in connection with these recordings.
- c. Exhibit, copy, reproduce, perform, display or distribute such Recordings (and to create derivative works from them) in whole or in part without restrictions or limitation in any format or medium for any purpose which The University of Mississippi, and those acting pursuant to its authority, deem appropriate.
- d. I release UM from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of such Recordings including any claims for defamation, invasion of privacy, rights of publicity, or copyright.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

My signature affirms these statements and confirms that I am at least 18 years old:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX H

## Interview Questions

1. Who or what prompted you to apply to the honors college?
2. What has been most surprising about being an honors student?
3. What, if any, has been your greatest challenge in the honors college?
4. What has been the most comfortable aspect of being a member of the honors college?
5. How would you describe the honors college to your younger peers in high school?
6. How would you describe the honors college to your family?
7. How do you think the honors college experience will help you after graduation?
8. What does being an African American member of the SMBHC mean to you?

## VITA

### **JENNIFER L. PARSONS**

#### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College at  
The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi**  
*Interim Associate Dean*, July 2018-  
*Assistant Dean for Communications & Development*, July 2015-June 2018  
*Academic Counselor*, August 2008-April 2010 and May 2011-June 2015

- *Supervising*—direct supervisor for the Coordinator of Recruitment and Admissions and the co-supervisor of the Associate Director of Development
- *Researching/Developing*—Revitalize purpose of and restructure, as needed, Honors Orientation and Honors Welcome Week each year; Assist the Dean in researching fundraising options and developing fundraising agenda for the honors college; Co-create and develop Resource Development Plan, including alumni relations and major gift initiatives; Collaborate with the University’s development officers; Maintain communication with the UM foundation concerning activities to ensure compatibility of development efforts; Prepare prospective and current donor reports; Accompany the Dean on trips to visit prospective and current donors
- *Counseling/Advising/Teaching*—Provide academic counseling through advising, guiding, and meeting with members of the honors college (1,500+ student body); Exercise discretion and independent judgment on a case-by-case basis; Advise students regarding study abroad options, post-graduate plans, national and major scholarships, degree requirements, course selection, and research options, which includes assisting students with applications, offering critiques of written work, including the senior thesis, and brainstorming capstone/thesis ideas; Write letters of recommendation; Help students with the registration process as needed; Taught an honors-only section of EDHE 105: The Freshman Year Experience in Fall 2015; Communicate with—and refer students to—the UM Counseling Center, Office of Title IX, and the Violence Prevention Office as appropriate when students disclose traumatic events
- *Coordinating/Designing*—Co-organize Honors Orientation and Honors Welcome Week, including organizing 200+ sessions and leading 25+ sessions; Lead designer of the 2016 Honors Retreat, renamed Honors Welcome Week; Work and strategize with Honors Program Manager on honors alumni events; Design flyers and posters for various events and institutes, including the Mississippi Water Security Institute (2016, 2017, 2018) and postcard solicitations
- *Recruiting/Identifying*—Meet with prospective students and their parents; Select students for admission and award scholarships to top, high-performing students from a pool of over 1,300 applicants each year



- *Monitoring/Communicating*—Maintain interface with representatives of Admissions, department chairs, and other administrative offices; Prepare operational reports derived from the University’s software, SAP; Monitor students’ academic progress through maintained student record files, SAP, e-mail and telephone; Teamwork with staff for effective orientation and retreat events and activities as well as convocations and honors commissioning; Maintain the confidentiality of sensitive information; Monitor and manage communication within social media concerning the SMBHC; Give presentations to groups of prospective and incoming honors students
- *Social Media/Website*—Maintain and update Instagram and Facebook accounts for the honors college; Maintain and update the SMBHC website: [www.honors.olemiss.edu](http://www.honors.olemiss.edu); Edit the weekly e-newsletter
- *Results*—Have advised an estimated 900 honors students to date on all majors offered by the University of Mississippi; Created a fundraising brochure that generated \$12,000 for the honors college in Fall/Winter 2015; Compiled, redesigned, and edited the annual Honors Report (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018), which is circulated among 6,000+ honors alumni, current honors students’ parents, current SMBHC donors, prospective donors and other constituents each year and has generated over \$75,000 in donations to date as well as planned giving commitments; Upon taking over the @umhoco Instagram account in Spring 2016, increased followers from approximately 300 to 1,641 and rising; Have written over 100 recommendation letters for students seeking employment, medical/dental/graduate school admissions, internships, and major scholarships; Initiated an honors minority club in February 2018 that resulted in the Honors College Minority Engagement Club, established and funded in August 2018

**FundraisingINFO.com, Oxford, Mississippi**

*Director of Prospect Research Services, May 2008-July 2008*

*Prospect Researcher, July 2006-May 2008*

- *Researching/Writing*—Researched and analyzed major gift prospects through various advanced techniques; Wrote in-depth reports, comprising of biographical, professional, political, stock, real estate, and other financial information, on prospective donors; Recognized, compiled and formatted data on wealth indicators; Summarized and published philanthropic news stories for three, weekly e-newsletters
- *Monitoring/Organizing*—Monitored weekly, monthly and yearly progress of e-newsletters, in-depth profiling and customer satisfaction; Utilized Microsoft Word, Excel and Access for tracking; Maintained and organized prospects’ records/files; Tracked progress of company’s success by analyzing statistics and writing complex reports; Maintained the confidentiality of sensitive information
- *Managing/Supervising*—Supervised four prospect researchers; Delegated large prospect research orders; Proofed and edited all research projects; Exercised discretion and independent judgment on a daily basis
- *Results*—Completed 400+ in-depth profiles on prospective donors; Created smaller reports on the philanthropic activities of 1,000+ individuals, foundations and corporations; Identified thousands of charitable individuals who have given gifts totaling \$10,000 or more

**The University of Mississippi**, University, Mississippi  
*Graduate Assistant*, Academic Support Center, August 2005-December 2005

- *Counseling/Advising*—Advised undergraduate students with undecided majors; Advised students with pre-health majors regarding degree requirements and course selections; Served as a liaison to the Career Center for students seeking career assessments; Advised a diverse student body ranging from international students to student athletes; Organized and facilitated individual and group workshops on study skills, time management and writing; Met with students for one-on-one consultations
- *Researching/Writing*—Researched, developed and wrote a course packet and teaching manual for EDLD 101: Academic Skills for College, under supervision of the late Dr. Susan Mossing, which was taught to nine class sections, reaching 147 at-risk students; Integrated commentary on essay, business and letter writing, decision making, goal-setting, retention topics and general study skills

**The University of Mississippi**, University, Mississippi  
*Senior Records Clerk*, Office of the Registrar, August 2003-August 2005

- *Administering/Communicating*—Demonstrated strong organizational skills through maintenance of all previous and current student transcripts; Communicated daily with supervisors, parents, students, potential students and fellow departments, including Admissions, the Graduate School, Financial Aid, and the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College; Maintained relationships with transfer students and their former institutions; Utilized undergraduate and graduate catalogues for academic transcript purposes; Demonstrated knowledge and understanding of the University's mission, history, academic programs, and SAP

## **EDUCATION**

The University of Mississippi, University, Mississippi  
*Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Higher Education*, Anticipated Graduation: May 2019

- Dissertation title: *African Americans and the Honors College Experience at the University of Mississippi*
- The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi

*Master of Arts (M.A.) Higher Education/Student Personnel*, December 2005

Harding University, Searcy, Arkansas  
*Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) English*, July 2003

## **COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIPS**

*Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*, UG Application Selection Committee, 2008-present  
*Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*, UG Scholarship Selection Committee, 2014-present  
*Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College*, Associate Director of Development Search (2018), Academic Counselor Search (2018), Admissions Counselor Search Chairman (2018), Senior Barksdale Fellow Search Committee (2017), Secretary Search Committee Chairman (2015),

Director of Office of National Scholarship Advisement Search Committee (2015), Regional Admissions Counselor Search Committee (2013, 2015, 2017), Secretary Search Committee (2012), and Academic Counselor Search Committee (2010, 2018)

*The University of Mississippi*, Working Group on Civility and Civil Discourse (2018-present), Provost & Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Search Committee (2017), University Assessment Committee (2017-2018)

### **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

American Counseling Association, 2015-present

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2015-present

National Collegiate Honors Council, 2011-present