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# **Black Excellence: Fostering Intellectual Curiosity in Minority Honors Students at a Predominantly White Research Institution**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**A**s a recent alumnus of the West Virginia University Honors College, I recognize my honors experience as a multi-faceted, intellectual journey that pushed me academically, professionally, and personally to become the lifelong learner that I am today. As the only Black honors student in my graduating class, I was aware of my tokenism, especially in my honors courses, in the honors college office, in the honors learning center (testWELL Learning Center), and in university and honors college committee meetings, but I never let it bother me much. My peers misperceived me as an “Oreo”; my physical appearance was Black, yet my mannerisms and opinions were “White” to them. Again, that did not bother me because I felt at home among my honors

college peers—until my senior year, when I took my first study abroad trip. After that trip, I experienced my first engagement with the Black community at the university and spent a semester unpacking my distorted understanding of African Americans in American history primarily through the mentorship of a remarkable Black woman. By the end of the semester, I understood the importance of correcting my White friends’ sense of privilege, representing and advocating for my community in this elite academic space of honors, and paving the way for other Black students to succeed in higher education. My self-awakening came at a pivotal time in my life, and it sealed my interdisciplinary interest in law and education.

As I have learned so far in law school, an individual who wants to change the status quo needs first to understand all the nuances and intricacies of an issue, so I address this essay to honors administrators—and other readers—who need to understand how to effectively foster Black students’ curiosity in honors. First, through the eyes of Black millennials, I define intellectual curiosity as Black Excellence and show the struggle and resilience of those who strive to be excellent. Next, I contextualize this struggle by analyzing national population statistics, enrollment data at four-year public research institutions, and student anecdotes about their educational experience. I continue by creating a foundational outline of the areas that honors colleges and honors programs can use to foster Black Excellence at their institutions, and finally I provide suggestions for honors colleges and programs to build upon the foundational outline and effectively foster Black Excellence.

Arguably, fostering intellectual curiosity should be something honors colleges and honors programs are doing for all their students by ensuring educational equality and by removing institutional barriers affecting their students. Honors colleges and honors programs cannot retroactively undo historical restrictions on Black people’s access to education and on their right to be critical thinkers and lifelong learners, but they can be proactive in increasing such access and their right to be intellectually curious. With this understanding, I believe honors administrators can expand their perspectives on what they should do to foster Black Excellence at their institution so that students like me will better succeed in honors.

## **WHAT BLACK EXCELLENCE IS**

My definition of “Black Excellence” is achieving success and fulfillment through a drive to question the status quo, to thirst for knowledge, and to

be the best representation of one's self while understanding the larger societal implications beyond individual success. For many Black millennials, excellence signifies achievement in scholarship, service, and leadership as acknowledged by peers, parents, and other members of the Black community who are making a difference. For some, graduation is a mark of excellence for young Black men and women who have served as executive officers in student organizations, represented the student body on university committees, and attained the highest honors, fellowships, and scholarships at their institution and across the country (Dixon; WVU Students). Other Black millennials, however, believe that the term embodies a historical, societal burden that is demoralizing rather than liberating given its unreasonable expectations:

Yes, my Blackness is amazing, great, beautiful and wonderful. But I'm beyond those words. I'm no longer comparing myself to those that don't represent me. . . . I don't feel this desire to prove my beauty anymore. . . . Give me space to say the wrong thing and reflect. (Mushimiyimana)

This unshackling declaration of self-emancipation from social pressures and intellectual restraints is what honors must foster, promote, and support for Black millennials.

A quick search for "Black Excellence" leads to "Black Excellence at VCU," a thirty-second video of three Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) students rapping about the term. In the viral clip, three dapper gentlemen rap about their future goals, careers, and aspirations as future doctors of medicine, biology, and physical therapy (Giles). When interviewed about this clip, and their other subsequent Black Excellence videos, the VCU students had this to say about their intent:

We just made the video just to make the video . . . not expect[ing] it to do this good, but we saw how it was touching more people, like little kids, who were inspired by this video, and we were seeing that the older people loved what we were doing. So, we did more videos. . . . We just wanted to give these kids hope and see that knowledge is cool and that it is okay to be intelligent. It is actually attractive. (Everett, Everett, and Brooks)

As a tribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on Martin Luther King Day, these VCU students succinctly articulated to young Black children that

being smart is something we should all celebrate, embrace, and love within ourselves and others. These empowering sentiments have been expressed in Kanye West's and Jay-Z's song "Murder to Excellence," which addresses the violent conditions that many Black people experience in pursuit of their dreams. In the song, Kanye West and Jay-Z insist that these experiences do not define Black people nor prevent them from seeking excellence, yet their struggle contextualizes their motivation to succeed for themselves and others within elite spaces among primarily white faces:

And I'm from the murder capital where they murder for capital / Heard about at least three killings this afternoon / Looking at the news like 'damn!' I was just with him after school / . . . Black Excellence, opulence, decadence / Tuxes next to the president, I'm present / . . . Now please, domino, domino / Only spot a few Blacks the higher I go . . . In the past if you picture events like a Black tie / What the last thing that you expect to see, Black guys? . . . (West and Carter).

The song's vivid imagery elicits depictions of notable figures who embody Black Excellence and have made a mark on fields where they are the lone spots on a domino. For example, tennis phenom Serena Williams became the "2015 Sports person of the Year," the first Black woman to be given the title, following her four consecutive tournament wins (Johnson). Haben Girma, the first deaf-blind graduate from Harvard Law School, was awarded the White House Champion of Change for her civil rights activism in disability advocacy and for educational excellence (Shapiro). Loretta Lynch, a "Devastating Diva" of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., became the first African American woman to be named U.S. Attorney General (León). Most notably, Barack Hussein Obama and Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama became the first African American president and first lady of the United States. These Black figures have graced the front-and-center of magazines, courtrooms, and governmental institutions as visual representations of Black Excellence in the public eye and as role models for young Black men and women as they strive for excellence.

Recognizing the importance of excellence in education, President Obama issued the executive order "White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans," a decree for educational institutions to decrease African American achievement gaps among their peers and to increase educational reform that results in higher levels of African American social mobility. This mobility emphasis has been driving the Initiative forward and shaping

conversations in and among higher education institutions. One example is the “Aligning for Black Excellence in Higher Education Summit” at the University of Southern California, where David J. Johns, the Initiative’s executive director, made the following statements:

It is difficult to learn if you do not feel safe, where you do not feel engaged or what you are exposed to is not relevant, and you do not feel supported. [The high school students] asked for three things [to address these learning difficulties] that I think are relevant no matter where we are. One, they asked for love. . . . Second, they asked for greater attentionality to who they are and whose they are. . . . Third, we need to get out of the habit of not listening when [the students] speak. (Johns)

If educators are able to create this safe, engaging, supportive space and actively listen to what their students are saying, why they are saying it, and who is saying it, they will foster the kind of academic excellence that is the apex of higher education and the common practice of honors colleges and honors programs. This goal cannot be achieved if educators are not proactive in achieving it or changing the status quo. All must do their part so that Black students feel that their voices, their struggles, and their stories are being heard.

## **A MINORITY WITHIN THE MINORITY**

As a Black student in higher education, I stick out. Civil rights activist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston said it best in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me”: “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” Standing in the foreground with my non-blending, immutable color, I am a noticeable splotch on a monochromatic image, an image that can be seen throughout the country within the galleries of higher education and special education exhibits.

## **The Numbers Don’t Lie**

In Figure 1, the U.S. Census Bureau shows that, as of July 1, 2014, there were 321,418,820 American citizens, with about 29.8% (or about 95,782,808) of these citizens, aged 25 years or older, with a bachelor’s degree or higher (U.S. Census 2014, *QuickFacts*). Of the total U.S. population, the Black or African American population composed 13.3% (or about 42,748,703) of

these American citizens, and Black or African American citizens composed about 6.0% (or about 5,713,000) of the American citizens aged 25 years or older with a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census 2014, *QuickFacts*; U.S. Census 2015, "Table 1-04").

Figure 2, also from the U.S. Census Bureau's data, shows that, within the Black or African American population, those with a bachelor's degree or higher composed about 13.4% (or about 5,713,000) of the population (U.S. Census 2014, *QuickFacts*; U.S. Census 2015, "Table 1-04"). These Black or African American citizens primarily had a bachelor's degree (63.7%, or about 3,636,000) or a master's degree (29.2%, or about 1,669,000), with less than 9% of Black or African Americans with a professional degree (3.4%, or about 197,000) or a doctoral degree (3.7%, or about 211,000) (U.S. Census 2015, "Table 1-04"). Overall, there were not many Black or African American citizens aged 25 years or older with at least a bachelor's degree, and those with more than a bachelor's were very few throughout the country.

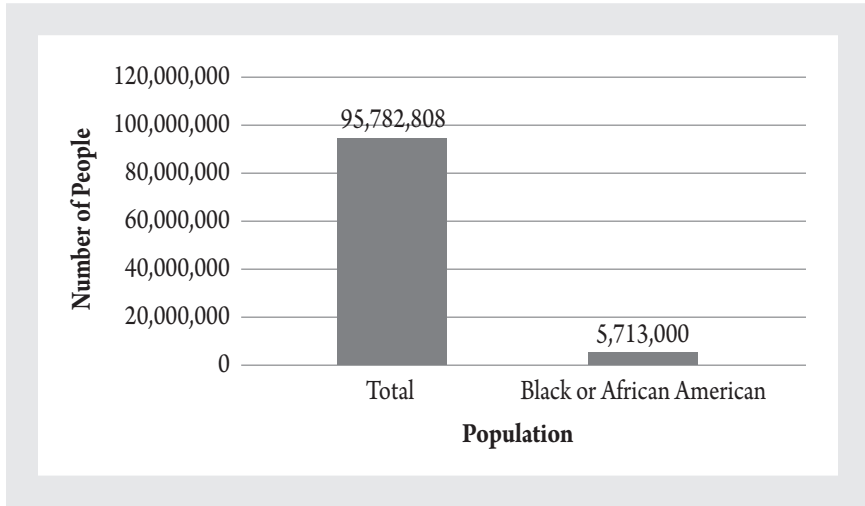
The National Center for Education Statistics 2014 fall enrollment data (see Figure 3) detailed where other Black or African American citizens were obtaining their degrees and who among the Black or African American community were joining the 6.0%. Of the 17,292,800 undergraduate students, Black undergraduate students composed 14.0% (or about 2,425,900), with more than 60% of these students being Black females (1,501,300) and a bit less than 40% being Black males (924,600) (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics 2014, "Table 306.10").

Figure 4 shows that Black female undergraduate students composed 15.0% of the total female undergraduate population (9,706,900), which is 1.5% higher than the percentage of total Black undergraduate students, while Black male undergraduate students composed 12.0% of the total male undergraduate population (7,585,900), which is 1.8% lower than the percentage of total Black undergraduate students (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics 2014, "Table 306.10").

If Black undergraduate students were among the 8,257,250 students at a four-year, public, research institution, they belonged to a Black population of 914,571 (or about 11.1%) of total enrollment at these institutions (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics 2014, "Table 304.40"). Moreover, if these Black undergraduate students were among the 4,320,786 students at a R3 (moderate research activity), R2 (higher research activity), or, like me, R1 (highest research activity) institution, they belonged to a Black population of 393,991, about 9.1% of total enrollment at R1, R2, and R3 institutions

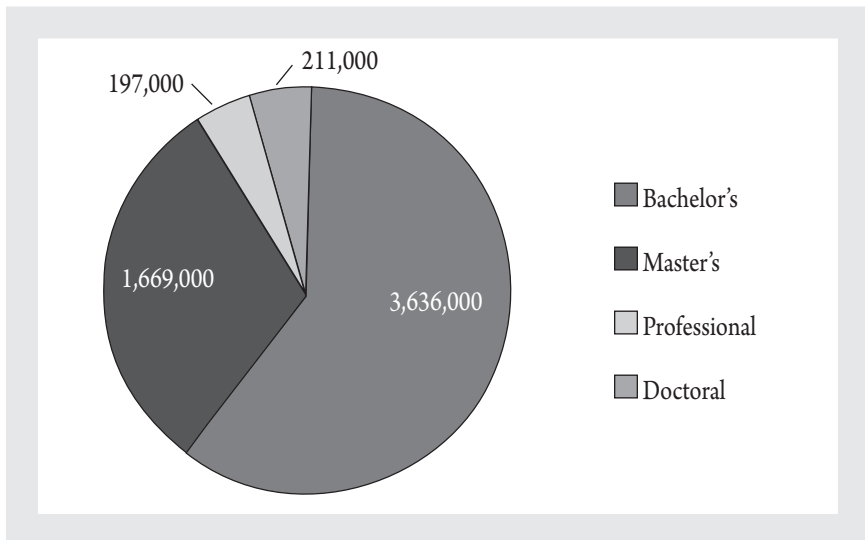
and 4.8% of total enrollment at four-year, public, research institutions (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics 2014, “Table 306.40”). See Figures 5 and 6.

**FIGURE 1. UNITED STATES POPULATION AGE 25 YEARS+ WITH A BACHELOR’S DEGREE**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

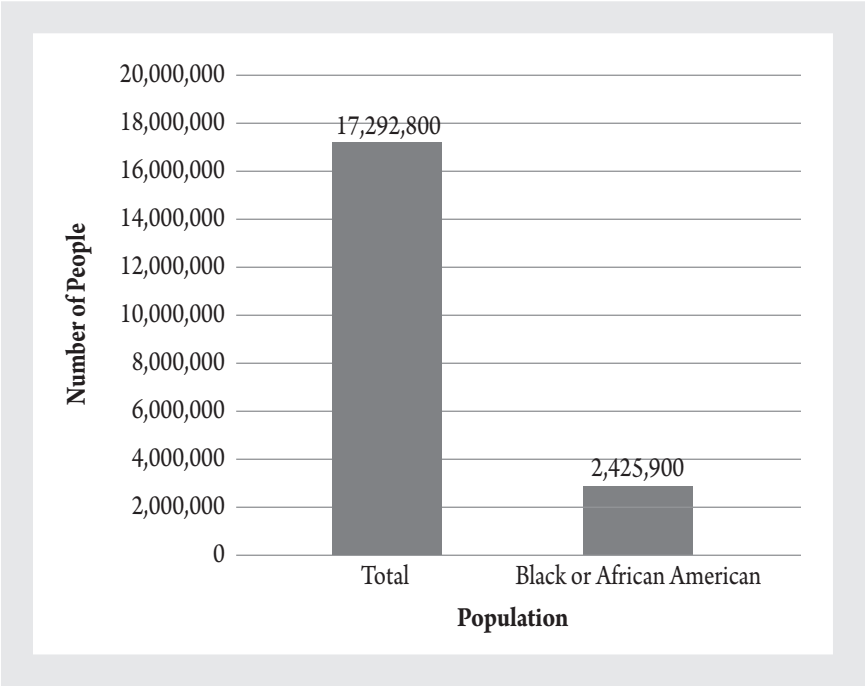
**FIGURE 2. BLACK OR AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION AGE 25 YEARS+ WITH A BACHELOR’S DEGREE OR HIGHER**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

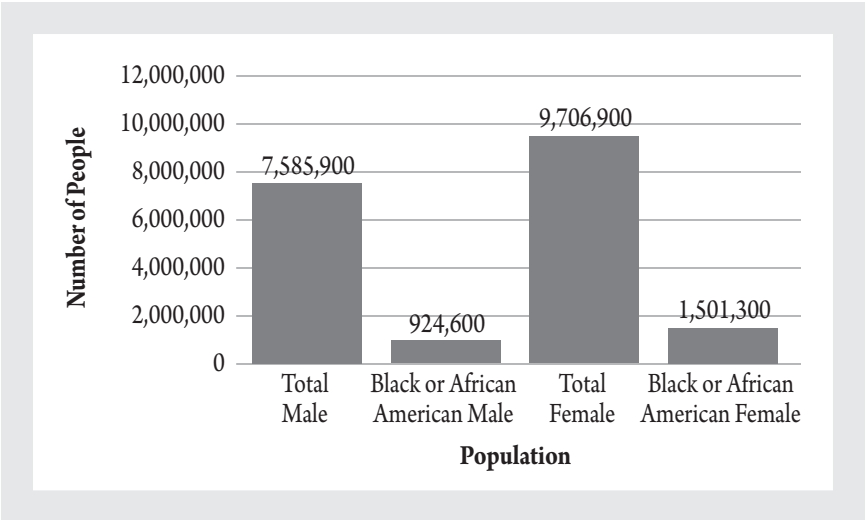


**FIGURE 3. 2014 NATIONAL FALL ENROLLMENT DATA: UNDERGRADUATES**



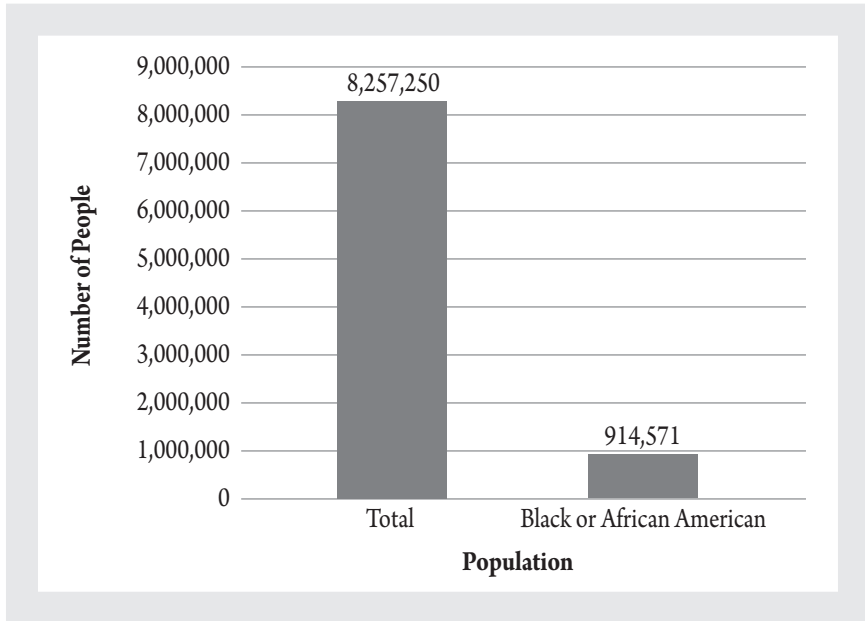
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

**FIGURE 4. 2014 NATIONAL FALL ENROLLMENT DATA:  
MALE VS. FEMALE UNDERGRADUATES**



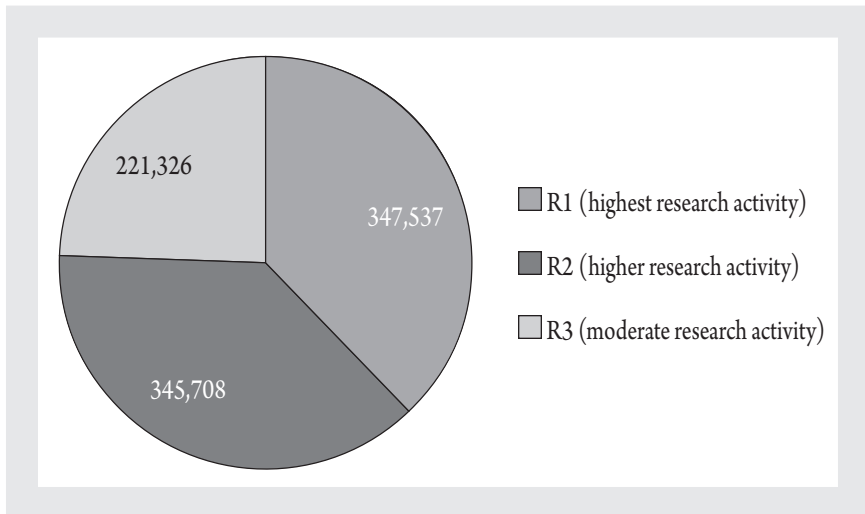
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

**FIGURE 5. 2014 NATIONAL FALL ENROLLMENT DATA: UNDERGRADUATE FOUR-YEAR, PUBLIC, RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

**FIGURE 6. 2014 NATIONAL FALL ENROLLMENT DATA: BLACK UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS TOTAL ENROLLMENT AT FOUR-YEAR, PUBLIC, RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS**



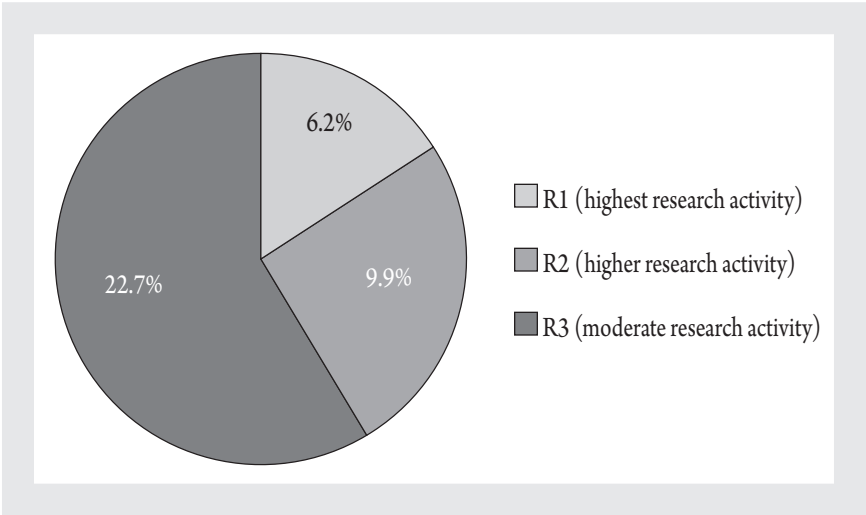
Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Particularly, a majority of this Black enrollment can be found at R1 institutions (38.0%, or about 347,537) followed by R2 institutions (37.8%, or about 345,708), and then R3 institutions (24.2%, or about 221,326). However, as shown in Figure 7, there is a greater representation of Black students compared to total enrollment at R3 institutions (22.70%) than R2 institutions (9.90%) and R1 institutions (6.20%) (U.S. National Center for Education Statistics 2014, “Table 304.40”).

In short, Black students are proportionally scarce at institutions with high levels of research activity, and these Black students are more likely than not Black females.

The National Collegiate Honors Council 2012–2013 Membership Survey, encompassing data for 428 institutions or 50% of the Council’s membership at the time of the survey, further illustrates an educational divide between those who are able to access a college or university and those who are able to access honors within their respective institution. The survey’s summary states that roughly 368 (or 86%) of these institutions had an average of about 6.1% of their undergraduate population in their honors program (*Histogram*). The survey reinforces the assumption that an honors program is accessible only to those who qualify, seek it out, and maintain the necessary requirements to graduate from an intellectually rigorous curriculum. As such,

**FIGURE 7. 2014 NATIONAL FALL ENROLLMENT DATA: BLACK UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AT FOUR-YEAR, PUBLIC, RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics

honors students are in an elite space where membership is held by a select few at any given institution. Black honors students in such a small, elite group stand out even more than in the general student population.

The National Collegiate Honors Council's 2014–2015 Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey, encompassing data for about 224 institutions (25% of the Council's total membership at the time of the survey), illustrates exactly how Black students stand out in honors programs. From the roughly 13 institutions, 5.8% of the Council's total membership, who chose to report race/ethnicity, Black honors students composed an average 10.4% of honors students, the second largest race/ethnicity after White honors students (69.4%) (*Descriptive Statistics*). Extrapolating from the survey's data, we get a murky picture—5.8% clear and 94.2% murky—of the total number of Black honors students at NCHC institutions. If the handful of honors programs that chose to report race/ethnicity had an average of 10.4% Black students, we can assume that the 94.2% had fewer, perhaps substantially fewer, Black students.

### **From the Numbers' Perspective**

The numbers speak for themselves: Black undergraduate students, especially Black male students, are significantly underrepresented in higher education, and Black honors students are even more underrepresented, even among honors programs that agree to fill out surveys and to include race/ethnicity. Black honors students can look around them and see few, if any, of their peers who look like them because these students are academically segregated from other Black students. Black honors students are enclosed in White-dominated spaces. Whether in an honors residence hall, a designated honors course or section, or an honors-related event, Black students see, hear, and experience a white narrative.

Researchers have discovered three of the internal conflicts that African-American students experience as a result of their underrepresentation at three different Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs): 1) Blackness-Whiteness, 2) Talking-Silence, and 3) Past-Future (Simmons et al. 388–90).

First, Blackness-Whiteness indicates the students' struggle to maintain their cultural identity and their pride in their Blackness within a White climate that forces them to assimilate their thinking, communication, mannerisms, and overall selves in order to survive. One student said the following about this internal conflict:

There is a war going on inside of me between my Blackness and your Whiteness. When I see myself in the mirror, I see a competent, talented Black woman. Then I got to class, look around, and realize that I need more. My Blackness seems too . . . um . . . Black, like I need to be more than who I am. I need what you [as a White person] have. I need an understanding of how things work, you know, politically. My Blackness, my personhood isn't enough. I need to Whiten myself to succeed. . . . (Simmons et al. 382)

This student's anecdote echoes centuries of shackled Black bodies and minds forced into societal subordination and inferiority. Even after the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and countless local, state, and federal civil rights actions that freed Black bodies and allowed access to higher education, this Black student's mind still remains imprisoned in a cell controlled by society's Whiteness, which dictates every move without ever having to place a finger on her. While in college, her mind has created or reinforced a semantic association between "White" and "successful" as well as "Black" and "failure." She very likely formed this association from the sheer image of her peers and interactions with her White classmates inside and outside of the classroom (Westen 5). Thus, when she looks in the mirror, attends class, and participates in an interview, she quickly recalls and recognizes that she is a failure simply from the color of her skin. Does this ring any bells? In 1947, Kenneth and Mamie Clark's "Doll Test" demonstrated a similar semantic association in Black preschoolers who quickly associated the "Black" doll with "ugliness" and "white" doll with "beauty"; as Black students struggled with this for almost seventy years, "[t]he battle between White and Black negatively affected not only their interpersonal development, but also their academic performance" (Simmons et al. 389).

Second, Talking-Silence is the students' struggle to speak up or engage in conversations about their culture and to represent their culture. Often, these students feel "that communicating [their] position could be detrimental to [them] and [their] culture," as this student illustrates:

We read a book by Toni Morrison. The professor discussed the importance of the book for African Americans. I wanted to stand up and talk about Morrison's writing and how it really resonates within the African-American community. At the same time, I did not want to perpetuate stereotypes or draw attention to myself as a Black man trying to explain a Black writer to a White audience. (Simmons et al. 383)

The “too Black” struggle exists within this student, too, and his silence is a form of controlling his Blackness. From this self-silencing, the student is not able to take control of his own learning, to regularly participate in the classroom, or to think critically about classroom material as related to society. Consequently, the student becomes a passive learner, disengaged from the class, scared to open his mouth, and forced to be an observer of others’ participation. This disengagement is likely a product of “solo status” of “any individual who finds himself or herself to be the only representative of his or her social category present”; this status affects all social groups yet has a “differential effect during [academic] performance” on those with a lower social status, particularly White and African American women (Thompson and Sekaquaptewa 188–89). A student may feel a stereotype threat on her performance as *the* Black student (or token) in the class, and silence is a refusal to be a poor representation of her culture, a way to protect her culture from further public scrutiny.

Third, Past-Future is the students’ struggle between remembering and staying true to their past while embracing their future goals and aspirations. Many first-generation college students recognize their families’ situations and try to create a better life for themselves and for their families, yet they have to do this by simultaneously concealing important aspects of themselves:

The more time I spend in college and the more successful I become, the more I yearn for the comforts and security of home. Here at school, it is all about risks. You put yourself on the line, and you are accepted based on your performance. At home, it is safe. They love you whether you have a 4.0 [grade point average] or not. I have a connection with myself, my people at home. Here, I am always going and doing, studying and producing. The person I am at home is not the same person I am here. In fact, they are opposites. At home, I am demure, I cook and clean, I listen. Here, I am talking, ordering, studying. My family wouldn’t understand this person before you [the moderator] now. In fact, they would be offended by her because she is so different from the sister, daughter, friend they know. I live two lives. I vacillate between them continually. (Simmons et al. 384)

Sadly, for some students, accessing higher education results in harsh, resentful feelings from those who are also benefiting from the students’ access. These people can be siblings, parents, grandparents, friends, and other acquaintances who never received the chance to go to college and thus harbor ill will

toward their sister, son, grandchild, or friend who does. This feeling might be mustered from a sense of inferiority at home, a product of hearing unfamiliar big words, a divergence from once-shared opinions and beliefs, arguments over current events and social issues, or experiences of some other loss or low level of intellectual authority. Although families and friends support their loved one's intellectual development, they want the person to be the same as before entering college, not someone trying to be uppity or White. As a result of the low number of Black Americans with at least a bachelor's degree, those privileged Black students must be able to uplift themselves and their community with their education without ostracizing anyone in the process, but this balancing act is not an easy task; sometimes it means living a double life, a paradoxical persona that simultaneously uplifts and degrades. These students are concerned with respectability politics, maintaining a prim and proper "White" self-image among the dominant culture to acquire a level of success that supersedes the consequences of their double lives. By managing this self-image, these students are able to "combat negative stigmas and stereotypes about African Americans' character, morality, and intellectual ability"; however, this form of cultural dissembling creates the following problems: (1) establishment of classifications that distinguish between a "good, responsible, Black person" and a "low-class, Black thug, prostitute, or baby momma"; (2) affirmation of practices (positive and negative) of the dominant culture; (3) portrayals of Black culture as lesser than or not as civilized as White culture; and (4) creation of an intra-racial, social class system that further "maintains the racial status quo" (Collins 97-98).

## **Facing the Challenge**

Ultimately, these four internal, intercultural struggles have been created from societal Eurocentrism and are reinforced in higher education, which continues to pressure Black students into disassembling their cultural identity and assimilating to the majority, thus constraining their intellectual freedom. To address this problem, researchers suggest the usual implementation of Afro-centric programming, direct community outreach, and faculty and staff diversity training; however, they do make a substantial suggestion that educational leaders adopt a transformative model of education, "consider[ing] theories of power and politics" to move "education toward an informed climate of inclusion" that will benefit both minority and majority students (Simmons et al. 391). For this move to occur, researchers stress the need for educational leaders to recognize and take charge in addressing it:

Institutions of higher education face an important challenge. They must admit that their relationships with African-American students are in need of attention, and then they must honestly and heartily attempt to develop and maintain better relationships. The struggle is real—both for African-American students and for their universities. Until that struggle is adequately and earnestly addressed, it is unlikely that the struggle will lead to progress. (Simmons et al. 392)

Universities must wake up to the fact that increasing higher education accessibility does not equate to increased success. If that were the case, we would no longer need civil rights activists like Melba Pattillo Beals to continue fighting and encouraging others to resolve racial disparities in education. As Beals writes, “The enemy was more visible [in 1954], the battle lines drawn in plain sight. What I call the ‘new racism’ is about success—success in terms of cultural, social, and economic status” (6).

## DEFINING A FOUNDATION FOR EXCELLENCE

Honors programs must prepare themselves to address “the new racism” with what they value most: knowledge. This knowledge comes from basic terms that have been and continue to be a part of civil rights advocates’ activists’ and allies’ vocabulary. Additionally, this knowledge comes from lingo that most Black honors students—generally the lingo of most honors students—have used, related to, or understood. These are terms with which Black students assess themselves, those around them, and the institutions that they interact with. By understanding these terms, honors administrators can give Black students love for their intellectual curiosity, attention to their identity and educational journey, and an ear to hear their voices, their struggles, and their stories. Below, I have provided these terms, my definitions of the terms, and their applicability as an outline for honors programs and colleges to assess themselves in fostering this excellence:

- Accessibility—Person(s), space(s), and possession(s) obtainable to those who seek them out.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are aware of on-campus resources (e.g., cultural centers or Black fellowship programs) and are able to access them.*

- Black Girl Magic—A declaration of cross-shade, intergenerational, resilient Black girl beauty that has withstood centuries of



societal depictions of hyper-aggression, hyper-domestication, and hyper-sexualization.

*Honors colleges should ensure that their Black female students are able to celebrate their melanin magic through their cultural expression and their intellectual curiosity, both of which honors colleges should also celebrate.*

- Black Lives Matter—A movement, and a declaration, combating prevalent anti-Black policies, practices, and institutions that perpetuate racism, injustice, and violence towards Black people while simultaneously affirming the value of all Black men's and Black women's lives across the United States (and throughout the world).

*Honors colleges should ensure that their Black students feel as if their lives and their education are equally valued as the rest of the honors college population and should show their support for the movement so all lives can matter.*

- Black Millennials—Black Americans who reached adulthood more or less around the millennium (2000), which includes those between the ages of 18 and 34, and who are recognized for their tech-savviness and their social and political engagement.

*Honors colleges should ensure that their students who are Black Millennials are able to get involved in the honors college and are able to take an active role in fostering, supporting, and promoting the college (e.g., in an honors ambassador program).*

- Cultural Proficiency—The ability to relate to another culture.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students have developed this skill by the end of their honors experience, whether through programming, coursework, or some other honors-specific offering.*

- Culture—The customs, practices, and beliefs of a group of people.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students have multiple opportunities throughout their honors experience to showcase themselves and where they come from.*

- Diversity—The physical and perceived differences among one another.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students recognize that they are uniquely different from one another, and the students should seek to educate themselves about their differences.*

- Equality—Two or more people being treated the same in a given situation.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are aware of honors-specific opportunities and are able to have similar access to these opportunities.*

- Equity—Two or more people sharing the same experience in a given situation.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students have a foundationally identical honors experience while accommodating their students' individual needs and history.*

- High-Key/Low-Key—The degree to which something is stated or expressed, with the former as a blatant expression and the latter as a concealed expression.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students (and the university community) are aware of their overt dedication to creating a culturally diverse honors student body (there should be no reason to be covert or ashamed about it).*

- Inclusion—The facilitation of all participants within a given conversation, action, or situation.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students feel a part of the program and feel as if they are contributing to its growth.*

- Multiculturalism—The celebration of different cultures.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are learning within a space in which their physical and perceived differences are being celebrated.*

- Shade—A dishonest or disrespectful action.

*Honors colleges should ensure that their students do not engage in behaviors that would result in cultural insensitivity or discriminatory practices, such as microaggressions within a classroom.*

- Social Justice—A principle of rectifying societal inequalities (e.g., poverty and discrimination) and promoting equal opportunity and rights for all.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are seeking to serve and to uplift their communities.*

- Try—Intending to elicit a negative or hurtful response.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are tolerant of one another and are respectful in their exchanges towards one another.*

- White Privilege—An undebatable, inheritable, Eurocentric advantage that has oppressed and disadvantaged those without this advantage as lesser in every way, particularly associated with race discrimination.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are educating themselves about this advantage, which impacts each of them, and are assessing Eurocentric societal standards that may have had a negative impact on their upbringing or their daily behavior.*

- Woke—The self-awareness of social inequalities and atrocities within a society.

*Honors colleges should ensure that all their students are becoming life-long learners and are critically dissecting and unpacking societal problems within their community, state, and country.*

## BUILDING UPON THIS FOUNDATION

From this established foundation, honors administrators and faculty should take action to implement and perpetuate Black Excellence within their program and colleges. Below are some areas to revisit.

### Study Abroad

Since the 2003–2004 academic year, Black students have slowly but steadily increased in number among the population of students who study abroad. According to the Institute of International Education, 3.4% (or about 6,502) of the 191,231 students who studied abroad in 2003–2004 were Black whereas, in the 2013–2014 academic year, 5.6% (or about 17,050) of the 304,467 students studying abroad were Black (“Profile of U.S. Study Abroad Students, 2003/04–2013/14.”). For all students, and especially for Black students, study abroad is a rare opportunity to step outside the boundaries of the country and see the world not as it is depicted on television but as it truly is for better or worse. The privilege of this experience enables students to lead their communities toward a more interconnected, educated global community. As former First Lady Michelle Obama has said, “Students who have the knowledge and skills to collaborate across cultures will emerge as the next

generation of global leaders with a greater understanding of the world.” These global leaders can recognize what it means to be Black in the United States as compared to, for instance, Cameroon or Trinidad and Tobago and can learn how their Black experience is interconnected to others across the globe.

Honors colleges and programs need to encourage their students to become these global leaders, so the next step is to create honors study abroad experiences for students that match this goal. In the Institute of International Education’s “Top 25 Destinations of U.S. Study Abroad Students, 2012/13–2013/14,” four of the top five top destinations were European countries: the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, and France (with China ranked fifth). Only one African country, South Africa, appeared on the list. Perhaps the reason for this underrepresentation is the stereotype of Africa as a hot, homogenous, grotesquely poor continent (Wainaina). Honors colleges and programs can counteract this misrepresentation of Africa by creating study abroad trips to African countries, destinations that hundreds of thousands of students studying abroad have never visited. These study abroad trips are most effective in the summer or for an entire semester due to cost, duration of time, and convenience for students. In offering such trips, honors programs get all their students immersed in a culture unlike their own and, for Black honors students, a culture that is the origin of their own.

## **Prestigious Scholarships and Fellowships**

Many students fund their study abroad experiences through national scholarships and fellowships, awards that honors programs put on their students’ radar. Gilman, Boren, and Fulbright are three study abroad awards that give students the opportunity to travel to overlooked destinations. According to the “Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship Program Annual Comparison to National Study Abroad,” from 2010 through 2015, 16–19% of Gilman recipients were Black, but in recent years Black students have received at most 7% of Fulbright grants despite “increased efforts to diversify the pool of grantees” (Kueppers). Mala Adiga, U.S. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Academic Programs, said, “We believe that individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, who have the talent and commitment to succeed, should have an opportunity to expand their knowledge of the world as Fulbrighters” (qtd. in Kueppers). Scholarship and fellowship foundations cannot increase these numbers alone; honors colleges and programs should be equally committed to these diversity efforts.

Honors colleges and programs can collaborate with fellowships advisors to cast a narrow net in their outreach to honors students based on their race or ethnicity as well as other factors. The West Virginia University Honors College's ASPIRE Office, for instance, is the unit that assists students with national scholarships and fellowships, and it has successfully employed this method of outreach based on factors other than race or ethnicity, e.g., academic discipline and class status. The outreach needs to feel personal and cannot consist only of an email that does not address the student by name or that is identical to another student's email. Black honors students are especially aware of wide-net outreach and inclined to ignore an invitation that is not authentic because, like other Black students, they are often included on email lists purely on the basis of their race. Personal outreach needs to be accompanied by Black representation in scholarship presentations or events, which should feature previous Black finalists and winners and Black faculty members who have mentored them or whose work can be useful to scholarship applications.

## **Recruitment and Retention**

Honors programs should also reassess their strategies for recruiting and retaining more Black students. No universal strategy is effective across all honors programs, but here are some suggestions. Honors programs can host recruitment events or participate in university recruitment events in urban areas; conduct outreach to National Merit Scholarship recipients, Gates Millennium Scholars, or recipients of other national undergraduate scholarships; and invite current as well as incoming Black students to join the honors program. For retention, honors programs can form an honors Black student organization; craft a fellowship or scholarship for incoming Black students; and collaborate with the university's diversity office, center for Black culture and research, or multicultural center.

## **Unapologetic Programming and Academic Coursework**

Honors programs pride themselves on pushing their students' intellectual curiosity and facilitating an environment where students and faculty can learn from one another. Programming should be equally unapologetic in educating students about current events related to race. Do not be afraid to host an event about Black Lives Matter or to encourage a student to do so. Do not be afraid to facilitate a dialogue on Rachel Dolezal and transracial

identity. Do not be afraid to create a networking event specifically for Black honors students and Black alumni. Do not be afraid to let your students be Black, to express their Blackness, and to educate others about the spectrum of Blackness. Within a predominantly White space, Black students need at least a corner of the room to call their own or to encourage them to redesign the entire space so that Blackness is not sectioned off. All honors students need to feel that their environment promotes their success and accommodates the diversity of their learning needs.

Alongside programming, academic coursework should challenge students to learn about intersectional, cross-cultural contemporary issues and to reframe distorted views of perceived realities. For example, an honors African American history course—one that examines the origins of African Americans from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century and analyzes popular misrepresentations of African enslavement and of civil rights leaders and organizations—would give Black students (and other students) an outlet to question, challenge, and learn more about an uncomfortable topic. A sociology honors course might focus on police brutality, exploring the history of police enforcement and policies. A biology course could focus on melanin and conclude with student research presentations on skin bleaching, albinism, and tanning.

## **Get to Know Your Students Who Do Not Look Like You**

It is plain and simple. You can get a better gauge of fostering intellectual curiosity in your Black students if you talk and listen to them, the most effective way to begin fostering Black Excellence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Black honors students at a PWI are constantly getting to know students, faculty, and staff who do not look like them given the abysmally low number of Black honors students compared to the rest of the university population. These students are bright, young thinkers, like the other students in the program, but they are directly and indirectly facing societal problems that others who are not Black have a difficult time relating to. When these Black students are spatially separated from other Black students, being Black can be hard because others cannot feel or relate to the racial issues still plaguing society. Honors administrators, though, can talk to their Black students to better understand them and be able to recognize how to support them.

During just one summer, I learned how difficult it is to be a professional, to carry a firearm, to have a neurological disorder, or to raise a child if you are Black in this country. I learned these lessons not by myself but as one of many Black students who returned to their universities the next year fearful of what was next, wondering if they would be the next Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, or Emmett Till. Returning to their campuses, Black students should not have these fears, and within honors programs they should feel comfortable without having to dissemble their identities or assimilate to another culture to survive. Black students, whether in an honors program or not, should not be fearful to think critically, to challenge the status quo, to break a glass ceiling (or two or three), and to be lifelong learners. As William A. Ashton, honors director at York College, has argued, honors programs must create a pluralistic environment where “no group or perspective dominates” because “there are so many voices that there is no majority” (66). Black voices need to be heard, and honors programs need to turn their words into actions to foster excellence among their entire student population; this begins with talking and listening to students.

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