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Not So Gifted:
Academic Identity for Black Women in Honors

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INTRODUCTION

Honors students are often regarded as the best and brightest at their universities, but the standard definitions of high achievement are not always useful for identifying talented undergraduate Black women. In a qualitative study of Black women in honors inside and outside the classroom at two urban predominantly white universities (PWIs), data derived from the students' experiences provide insights about the standard labels of high achievement in higher education. The voices of these women expand the discourse on student academic identity.

Picture one of these honors students: Anissa wipes her finger through the word "gifted," which is written on the small dry erase board. Then she erases "smart." Despite earning admission to honors as an incoming freshman and thriving in her competitive courses, she does not consider herself gifted or smart like her classmates. They confidently answer questions in class and help

other people understand the homework. She knows the answers in class but is too shy to speak up. Although Anissa would never refer to herself as smart or gifted, her university might label her that way.

Anissa is one of sixteen students who participated in the qualitative study of the experiences of Black women in honors at two urban PWIs. While the literature on students in collegiate honors programs characterizes them as high-achieving or gifted, the reflections of the women in this study on their own identities indicate that some of the labels for their academic identity are not how they would define themselves. Honors educators need to know how underrepresented students in honors perceive their academic identities, and then they can select strategies for adjusting policies and practices with these perceptions in mind.

Understanding the experiences of high-achieving Black women is an important yet often overlooked part of fostering student success in college, particularly at PWIs. The most prominent studies in higher education on undergraduates of color over the last fifteen years largely focused on the experiences of Black men of a variety of ability types, expanding the knowledge on that population (Cuyjet; Harper; Harper & Quaye; Pearson & Kohl; Strayhorn). From that body of research came valuable information about how to enhance the academic environment for Black men (Bonner & Bailey), best practices for specific interventions that support the needs of Black men through mentoring or community-building organizations (Bledsoe & Rome; Baker), and patterns and outcomes of their engagement in campus life (Harper; Strayhorn & DeVita; Harper & Quaye). Alternatively, some focus on Black students generally (Solorzano et al.; Fries-Britt & Turner; Mwangi & Fries-Britt). Although these studies offer major contributions, there is limited similar research focusing specifically on Black women high-achievers.

Volumes of research have been produced on how college affects students (Pascarella & Terenzini), the phases of their psychosocial and identity development (Evans et al.), and influences on their success or attrition (Tinto, "Dropout" and "Taking Retention"), yet, high-achieving Black undergraduate women were not the focus of any of those influential studies (Sanon-Jules). The experiences of this population of Black women remain understudied (Fries-Britt & Griffin; Strayhorn; Sanon-Jules).

Patton and Croom's 2017 edited volume on Black women and college success addresses part of the gender imparity. The volume features some of the leading and emerging scholars focusing on Black women in higher education research and provides a historical and generational perspective of Black women (Stewart), examination of identity politics (Porter), analysis of the

influence of sociostructural stressors (Donovan & Guillory), and strategies for institutionalizing support for Black women undergraduates (Shaw). Only one of the chapters focuses on high-achievers, examining the experiences of working-class Black women attending an Ivy League university (Johnson). The scholar known best for generating early studies on high-achieving Black women is Fries-Britt, whose works include an examination of stereotype resistance ("The Black Box," with K. A. Griffin) as well as general research on gifted Black collegians: "Moving Beyond Achiever Isolation: Experiences of Gifted Black Collegians" in 1998 and "High-Achieving Black Collegians" in 2002. Griffin also contributed to the work on Black high achievers, focusing on academic motivation. The smallness of this collection of research, however, is evidence that the voices of Black women in honors are limited in the literature on the college student experience, leaving them invisible to campus support programs and institutional policy.

Politics of Identity

As a professional honors educator, I have observed two misperceptions associated with high-achieving Black women: that their experiences are the same as students with similar intellectual and ethnic identities and that their academic talent precludes them from needing resources to be successful. Both assumptions oversimplify the complex issues that result from these students' overlapping identities, but the lack of research on high-achieving Black women seems to support these misperceptions.

Despite the intellectual abilities they have in common, high achievers are not a homogeneous population. The ethnic differences within the population mean that academically talented Blacks encounter an assortment of challenges at PWIs that differentiate them from their white peers (Strayhorn; Sanon-Jules). Black women are underrepresented at PWIs, especially among high achievers (Coleman & Kotinek). High-achieving Black students often feel racially isolated on campus and alienated from their majority and other minority peers. Inside and outside the classroom, they experience subtle and overt forms of racism from peers and instructors. They feel constant pressure to prove themselves academically (Fries-Britt & Griffin; Strayhorn). Additional unique issues would no doubt emerge if more empirical research were available.

Racial identity matters in the context of Black women's experiences as the issues facing Black and high-achieving students "come together in unique ways" (Griffin 384). Some of the problems they face echo the negative

experiences of their non-honors Black peers at PWIs, who also report experiencing racist microaggressions (Swim et al.) and stereotype threat inside and outside the classroom (Fries-Britt & Turner; Spencer et al.; Steele). Environments at PWIs can pose several challenges for students of color. For Black high-achieving women, their position at the intersection of multiple oppressions and their membership in a variety of group identities play a role in how they experience various spaces in college life (Steele). Campus life mirrors the patterns of racial organization in greater society through its "racial marginalization, racial segregation of social and academic networks" and underrepresentation inside and outside the classroom among faculty and university staff (Steele 26). How high-achieving Black women perceive their various identities in these contexts needs more attention, but at the same time not all Black students are the same. The diversity within the group—in social interactions and academic ability particularly—make it important to examine the differences despite, as the research illustrates, consistencies in the hostility of the campus environment (Strayhorn; Griffin; Stewart, "Perceptions").

Identifying High Achievement

Undergraduate high achievers are often students with high SAT scores and excellent grades in high school that earn them merit awards in college admissions. They also typically maintain at least a 3.0 college GPA, have high IQs, and are member of a scholars or university honors program (Freeman; Griffin; Harper & Quay; Strayhorn). They may have taken honors, Advanced Placement, dual enrollment, or International Baccalaureate courses. Honors admission criteria vary by university, so pre-college indicators may also include high school involvement, a letter of recommendation from a teacher, or an application process that evaluates students' writing and critical thinking skills. Undergraduates meeting these criteria are expected to "achieve the highest levels of academic and professional success" (Solano qtd. in Fries-Britt & Griffin). Students of color, particularly from low socioeconomic backgrounds, have historically underperformed on standardized tests, including the SAT or ACT ("More Blacks"). Lacking scholastic opportunities such as AP courses to prepare them for such high-stakes tests ("More Blacks"), the high-achievement criteria easily miss talented and otherwise qualified young Black women (Borland). In the present study, the definition of high achievement is expanded to include the term "academically talented" to be more directly inclusive of students whose performance inside the classroom is an indicator of their qualification for honors.

For Black women, the intersections of race and gender play a role in their worldview (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*) and how they make meaning around college experiences, particularly as high achievers, in a way that differs from their peers (Winkle-Wagner; West et al.). In their study of African American undergraduate women, Winkle-Wagner found that culture shock and isolation on campus were common. According to a review of the literature by West et al., "several theorists have argued that Black women's position at the intersection of racial and gender oppression creates a unique lived experience different from that of Black men" (333). Studies on Black men echo this perception (Cuyjet). Unfortunately, the lack of research on high-achieving Black women makes other, more specific differences from their peers unclear.

Many believe that excellent credentials mean that high achievers face fewer obstacles to collegiate success than their peers, but the literature suggests otherwise (Fries-Britt, "High-Achieving"; Fries-Britt & Griffin; Freeman). The challenges facing some Black women include isolation, alienation, and negative interactions with faculty and peers, which are common feelings among students who leave college (Tinto, "Dropout"; Strayhorn). Despite their academic talent, these challenges can put students at risk (Strayhorn). As a matter of social justice, institutions need to learn about high-achieving Black women to foster the same opportunities for their success as other collegians and to promote retention (Fries-Britt, "High-Achieving").

Academic Identity and Performance

As with racial identity, existing research argues that environments affect how students develop their sense of academic identity. One study argues that the complex meanings that African American high school students attribute to their academic identity are informed by the attitudes and practices in their school context (Nasir et al.). The same study finds a predictive positive relationship for students with high ethnic identity and high academic achievement. Other researchers argue that there is a stigma against academic achievement among Black students because of its association with whiteness (Fordham & Ogbu). Often high achievers, or students who identify strongly with their academic identity, are accused of "acting white," as Carter found in a 2006 study of Black and Latino youth. A few contemporary examinations of the "acting white" phenomenon argue that some Black students' resistance to doing well in school is more of a resistance to white normalcy than to getting good grades or valuing education (Winkle-Wagner; Spencer et al.).

Based on the way Black people are portrayed in the media and popular culture, and given the cultural and social norms in the contexts where they live and are educated, several stereotypes are associated with the academic identity of Blacks. Socially, they experience pressure to represent a kind of Blackness commonly associated with "speaking stupid" (Carter) or having an "attitude" (Winkle-Wagner). These stereotypes reflect a social perception that "producing intellectual work is generally not attributed to Black women artists and political activists. Such women are typically thought of as non-intellectual and nonscholarly, classifications that create a false dichotomy between scholarship and activism, between thinking and doing" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 15). The pervasiveness of these perspectives signals the importance of studying smart Black women to foster awareness and offer strategies for their support.

METHODS AND DATA

As part of a broader study on the experiences and identities of high-achieving Black undergraduate women, my focus is how students in this population make meaning around their academic identity or high-achieving label. To meet the standard practices of research in honors education, high-achieving Black women are identified based on honors program membership, consistent with Fries-Britt & Griffin's research. The limitations of the honors indicator, particularly applied to students of color (Borland), result from a lack of more comprehensive measures for identification.

Areas of focus for the present study are (1) the experiences of Black high-achieving college women inside and outside the classroom at an urban PWI and (2) the salience of various aspects of these students' identities. A purposive sample of students was selected from individuals who responded to a call for participation via email from the honors college staff at two urban universities. Sixteen students completed both the online background questionnaire and individual, semi-structured, in-person interviews between fall 2015 and spring 2016. Participants shared their availability for interviews as part of the background questionnaire. Based on their availability, I communicated with each participant to coordinate an interview at an on- or off-campus location of their preference. Interviews lasted 60–75 minutes, were audio recorded, and were later transcribed for analysis. Second interviews, which were also in-person, served as member checks and follow-ups to discuss themes from the first interviews. They lasted 45–60 minutes. Table 1 lists participants' age, class year, and academic discipline.

Data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software and was an iterative process during and after the data collection (Lichtman). I incorporated Seidman's approach to analyzing interview data by creating a participant profile after each interview that included responses to the background questionnaire and my observations from our interaction. Profiles and memos provided early indicators of commonalities across participants' backgrounds and themes in their experiences. Transcripts were closely read, and codes were created inductively from data as well as based on the questions in the interview protocol and constructs significant to the topic of interest: the importance of gender, race, and high-achievement status (among other identities addressed by the student in her interview) and the nature of interactions with others in campus life (Lichtman). Codes were then clustered into code families and organized into major themes.

The present study focuses on academic identifiers, but it is important to acknowledge that there are many more facets to the participants' identities. The complex identities of high-achieving undergraduate Black women make them subject to multiple oppressions (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*). Intersectionality is an instrumental "interpretive framework for thinking through

TABLE 1. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

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

how intersections of race and class, or race and gender, or sexuality and class, for example, shape any group's experience across specific social contexts" (Collins, *Fighting Words* 208). Grounded in the work of law scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and in Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins's Black feminism, this paradigm recognizes Black women as "agents of knowledge," examining the perceptions of Black women from their own words to learn about them individually and collectively (Collins, *Fighting Words* 177). The intersectional framework recognizes that identity "salience varies among and within groups" (Collins, *Fighting Words* 208) and that the analyses of power in various contexts serve to "reveal which differences carry significance" (Tomlinson qtd. in Cho et al. 798). This framework provides a theoretical lens for this study and would serve future research on Black women in honors as well. As microcosms of U.S. society, colleges are sites where the systems of power that subordinate these students as women, as Black, and by class manifest in the interactions that occur as part of campus life.

In line with the intersectionality framework, the broader study features a holistic analysis of participants' identity salience and experiences in college contexts. As a Black woman, I recognize that Black women in honors are more complex than just their academic identities and that each facet can play a role in students' perceptions and experiences, but definition and salience of academic identity are among the robustly explored constructs in the study and are the focus in this paper. I anticipate discussing more holistic analysis of the identities of the students in future articles.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Black women speaking for themselves provide the best way to learn more about their experiences. The selection of qualitative interviews for the data collection method privileges these women's perspectives, providing them an opportunity to contribute their voices to the discourse on the college experience. Although qualitative studies are not generalizable, the participants' perspectives may resonate with the experiences of other Black women in similar honors contexts. Methodologically, the decision to consider the experiences of these students without a comparison group centers them in the study. These experiences are valuable as sources without the need for comparison against a white or male normative group (West et al.).

FINDINGS

Academic Identities Defined

During the interviews, participants shared their perceptions about a list of terms I provided that were associated with honors students. Among the list were "smart," "high-achieving," "gifted," and "academically talented." Students defined each term and described the behavior it signified. They also reflected on how well the term fit their self-description and if others have used those terms to describe them. On the dry erase board, I wrote the academic identities the participant selected during the interview, the racial or ethnic identity indicated on their background questionnaire, female, and college student. Participants then added any additional identities or group memberships they felt mattered to their self-description.

Table 2 shows participants' selections of the honors descriptors that fit them best as part of the dry erase board exercise. Table 3 lists each participant's selected academic identity terms. Nearly all the students feel the term "high-achieving" is a good fit for their academic identity. Most also describe themselves as smart. "Academically talented" and "gifted" are not among their preferred terms.

High-Achieving

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

TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPANT SELF-DESCRIPTION OF ACADEMIC IDENTITY TERMS

High-Achieving	Smart	Academically Talented	Gifted
13	10	5	3

Zoe describes herself as a high achiever, one of those "people who are just always striving to get to a better place than where they are now." Nicole also describes herself with this term, noting that high achievement can occur inside and outside the classroom. It means "you're just shooting to do your best and to be the best out of your peers and be at a next level versus everyone else" (Nicole). Amber describes herself the same way, and Mia agrees, noting that high achievers are "always doing a lot, signing up for things, giving back to other people, [and] maybe receiving awards" (Mia). In contrast to how the literature uses the term in relation to honors students, the participants feel high achievement means more than just SAT scores and GPA, nor does it require natural smarts. "You just try really hard," Lauryn observes. In describing their own achievements, effort and a sense of agency play a role in whether the participants are successful with their big goals.

The high-achieving label does not fit for a few of the participants because they reason that it requires giving 100% of their effort or attention to something. If they sense that they can give more to some aspect of their involvement

TABLE 3. ACADEMIC IDENTITY TERMS BY PARTICIPANT

Participant	Identifiers Selected by Participants			
Aisha	smart	high-achieving		
Amber	smart	high-achieving	gifted	
Anissa		high-achieving		
Crystal	smart			
Grace		high-achieving		
Jacqueline	smart	high-achieving	gifted	
Keshia	smart	high-achieving		
Lauryn		high-achieving		
Mia		high-achieving		academically talented
Michelle		high-achieving		academically talented
Miranda	smart			academically talented
Nicole	smart	high-achieving		academically talented
Serena			gifted	academically talented
Shannon	smart	high-achieving		
Shantel	smart	high-achieving		
Zoe	smart	high-achieving		

or academics, then they do not achieve as highly as they feel capable. Miranda and Crystal are particularly critical of their achievements.

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

Because she is a very involved student leader who is also focused on her academics, limitations on Miranda's time prevent her from achieving all that she could. Crystal is less involved in campus life and agrees that her lack of effort keeps her from achieving, but she believes she would be a better, higher achiever if she applied herself. Being high-achieving would mean "accomplishing all the things that I've set out for myself . . . maybe even accomplishing things that I never perceived . . . I was able to" (Crystal). Her assessment of her college performance is that she has yet to reach her potential.

Smart

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

They also expect that "smart" includes characteristics and behaviors that test scores do not measure, like creativity. Grace is talented in the arts; she sings and plays multiple instruments. "I think it ties in with being good at things. Being good at playing an instrument would mean that you're smart musically. Or if you're good at coming up with ideas, then you're smart intellectually." Zoe feels that being smart means "knowing yourself, plus a willingness to learn or an eagerness to learn, and then the ability to use the information that you have resourceful[ly]." Aisha and Jacqueline agree. "I feel like smart is someone who knows a lot of things, who knows how to apply the knowledge that they know" (Aisha). Jacqueline notes that "it's not enough to just know the facts from the textbook. You have to be able to make them

actionable and put them into context." Continuing to gain knowledge and understanding how to apply it is important to being smart.

Participants note the difference between book smarts and street smarts and say that the kind associated with honors students tends not to be street smart. They suppose that a person who is smart should also have common sense, a quality "which a lot of people lack," according to Amber. "I have engineering friends who are brilliant, absolutely brilliant, but can't function sometimes." Serena and Jacqueline echo Amber's sentiments. Mia feels that an important part of being smart is "knowing what's right and what's wrong" and making good decisions: "I try not to base intelligence off of test scores or anything. It's more about the person and how they react to things." Simply being book smart and able to do well in classes does not mean that a person is smart in every area of her life.

Participants vary in their perceptions of the amount of agency required to be labeled with or to perform smartness; it can be innate or a product of effort. Lauryn describes both in her definition of "smart" and feels the term does not apply to her.

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

Lauryn feels that other people could improve their grades or academic performance by working hard like people who are labeled smart. Anissa feels the same way, particularly in relation to one of her friends from high school whom she considers smart but who is lazy. "Anyone can be smart if they try. It's not something you're born with." Anissa's view is evident in how she describes encouraging her high school friend to go to class and do his homework so that he will get better grades. According to Nicole, students would be "taking that extra mile to study versus just getting by" if they were smart. Agency is significant to a student's being considered smart, based on Lauryn's, Anissa's, and Nicole's ideas. Studying, being diligent, and working hard pay off.

Although most participants feel that being described as smart is a compliment, a few acknowledge a stigma associated with the term, particularly as they reflect on how they are treated regarding that label in other contexts.

"I used to think it was an insult back in the day. Like 'Oh, you're so smart.' The way people would say it. It's like oh, is that not a good thing to be smart? Doesn't that take you places?" Nicole's peers tried to make her feel bad about her good academic performance, insinuating that it is different in a bad way and not okay to be smart.

Miranda has another connotation of smartness. "Even when I was younger, actually, it was kind of used to punish me a little bit. It's like 'Are you trying to be smart'? Like, you had an attitude." In a familial context, when she needs to be respectful of authority, it can be inappropriate to act smart or behave like a know-it-all. Other students share similar school-age experiences as well and allude to the role these earlier experiences play in how well the list of honors identities describes them. The variety of connotations for this term suggest that the participants receive mixed messages from their social, academic, and familial environments about the meaning of being smart and whether it is something constructive or even socially acceptable.

Academically Talented

I introduce the term "academically talented" to add more precise language to the discourse on honors students. Participants describe academically talented people as those who "perform better in classes," are "good at schoolwork," and are "book smart." Amber describes being academically talented as related to "the amount that you put into learning that material. I think you can be talented, but not get the results that you want, because you don't put the work into it" (Amber). Putting in work is also key to Anissa's understanding of the term.

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

Application and effort matter in many of the other participants' definitions as well. Crystal, though, feels the term refers to an innate quality: "I think talent's also something that you're naturally good at, so it's just where you thrive, and academics is for academically talented." Participants have a lot of opinions about the term, but only five add the term to their list of descriptors.

Michelle feels the term fits her. She describes academically talented people as "good at schoolwork. So, good at studying and organizing, getting

things in on time, and asking questions. Just good at figuring out how they can learn stuff." Serena adopts the term as well, suggesting it refers to excelling at school, understanding concepts, and passing tests. Nicole likes calling herself academically talented. It means "you get really good grades. Maybe you know how to finesse a test and can really . . . write a good paper, and sound eloquent. I think that just means you're a superstar in school, in your classes and stuff like that. Academically talented, yeah, a smarty pants basically, but not in a sassy way." As Nicole's definition suggests, ascriptions of academic talent can be associated with having an attitude or an air of arrogance. She is careful to clarify her meaning.

Several of the definitions associate the term "academically talented" with the other honors labels, particularly among students who indicate that it is not a salient part of their identity. Shantel indicates that she feels "like that's another word for smart, academically talented. They're good at school or good at school-related things." Amber relates the term with the idea of smartness as well. Shannon feels the terms are similar, too, but "academically talented" has a different tone than smart, though she cannot describe the difference she senses.

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

Shannon goes on to indicate that academically talented is the same as smart, and gifted and academically talented are the same.

Gifted

Three participants include the term "gifted" in their academic identity, but only one participant consistently describes herself as gifted on her list and during her interviews. Many participants' constructions of the term are associated with innate abilities or biology. Nicole describes a gifted person as "someone that's just a little bit smarter or does better in the subject or something like that. They're wired differently so that . . . they can go to the next level in that subject." Others say that gifted people have "special talents," are "born smart," or have a "natural" ability to do well at something on the first

try. People can be gifted academically or in music, art, sports, or other extra-curricular endeavors.

A few of the students associate the term with their participation in special programs in primary or secondary school: they took achievement or IQ tests and were placed into resource or project classes to enhance their academic curriculum. At this point in their academic careers, however, they no longer feel that the label is appropriate for them. Crystal reflects on being gifted as a child and the differences she feels in her aptitude as a college student.

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

In college, the expectations for learning and understanding information are different than in high school; Crystal feels she is not gifted anymore because she cannot use the same effortless methods for learning from prior educational environments. Crystal describes a common transition issue many new college students face: formerly successful ways of learning in their high school classroom environment are not a good fit for the demands of their college academic environment. The new teaching and learning environment requires the need to adapt their learning style. Anissa's definition is consistent with other participants' but draws attention to additional factors in the outcomes associated with giftedness.

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

Amber and Jacqueline agree with Anissa's notion of parental influence. Amber was told she was gifted as a child and participated in special academic programs, as did Serena. Jacqueline consistently labels herself gifted in her interviews and feels there is more than biology involved in being gifted: there are sociocultural and economic privileges that help foster these abilities.

Academic Identity Salience

The results suggest that students are socialized not to talk about how intelligent or accomplished they are, particularly as Black women. Student descriptions of their academic identities reflect their acculturation in society as part of their position at the nexus of various social groups. They are reluctant to adopt the terms "smart," "high-achieving," "academically talented," or "gifted" for themselves despite fitting their own definitions of the terms. They experience a palpable tension between embodying their honors identities and feeling comfortable acknowledging those abilities. Michelle's perceptions illustrate this concern. "I feel like, oh, I'm showing off if I say I'm smart and academically talented. But I feel like I wouldn't be here if I wasn't." She is reluctant to own her academic identifiers because she feels it is "show offy."

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

Michelle alludes to the mixed messages she receives about having pride in her achievements. Instead of touting their own accomplishments, Keshia and Shantel mention that others would describe them as high-achieving. Although Shantel does not like the labels for herself, she feels her family does.

> So I know that my mom would use the word "smart" to describe me—academically talented, high-achieving—because whenever I get, like all my report cards, if they were good, which they usually were—like straight As and stuff like that—she would put it on Facebook, show all her friends, tell everybody, you know. So I know that she's proud of me as far as that goes, and she would describe me as smart.

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

Students express concern about how they would be perceived by their peers and by society more broadly if they brought attention to their achievements or accepted the high-achieving label. Despite the various constructive and judgmental connotations that high achievement carries, most participants willingly own that term as part of their identity. Students in the study do not seem to embrace my introduction of the term "academically talented," but the overlap in participants' definitions across the other honors terms and

"academically talented" suggests that the term may offer a suitable alternative term in future research.

Numerous participants stress the importance of natural talent or putting full effort into their goals as part of the reason for their achievement. Although these ideas play a role in their performance, they are all intrinsic explanations of success. They mostly ignore the structural barriers that sometimes limit access to resources or social capital that might enhance their ability to succeed. Neglecting external influences on their performance means that students may blame themselves for not achieving their full potential whereas the cause may be a combination of internal and less visible external obstacles.

Despite mentioning how some of the achievement terms do not fit, participants' definitions are descriptive of their academic outcomes and performance. People are socialized differently along the lines of race, class, and gender, and other identities, so the disconnection with the terms is also an indicator that Black women are not commonly associated with intelligence. This disconnect signals the need for reconsideration of the language used to describe honors students—methodologically as well as in practice—to enhance how this population of students is supported by faculty and staff or recruited by admissions.

Implications

Expanding Definitions

Participants in the study problematized the institutional focus on test scores as indicators of high-achievement ability, arguing that academic behaviors and extracurricular engagement criteria may also be key to identifying students with potential. "Gifted" is not at the top of the list of preferred descriptors for the honors students in this study. Their choice of other terms to describe themselves does not reduce the value of existing discourse on honors students, but we need to expand the labels we assign honors students and other talented undergraduates to be more inclusive of students' experiences. We may also need to reinforce to students how impressive their achievements are as incoming or current college students to encourage them to contribute their talents to campus life.

Definitions of "gifted" or "high-achieving" from the literature are not a reflection of how all students think about their abilities, creating a call to shift research on students with academic talent to be more inclusive of multicultural perspectives. Intersections of race, gender, social class, and religion

play a role in how students perceive the importance of their high-achieving identity in their college experiences. We can take our definitions beyond the literature and meet students who engage with our programs where they are. More discussion of experiences in honors, academic identity, and other student perspectives needs to be centered in our work in honors, especially in regard to high-achieving Black women, who are not the focus of any recent major honors studies.

Echoing Guzy's Forum essay in this issue of *JNCHC*, my findings stress the need to consider how students define themselves in concert with the existing research on their behavior and lists of gifted and high-achieving student traits. The results of my study offer new reflections on honors identities in the students' own words.

Reconsidering Admissions Practices

The underrepresentation of Black women in honors and in research on high-achieving students may be a reflection of the limitations of the selection criteria for honors programs. Many institutions and honors programs stress standardized testing in assigning high-achievement status, but there is more to these students than their scores. As one participant argues, "There should be more to determining smartness or high-achieving than a student's ability to perform well on assignments and tests." Some ways that institutions can remedy an overemphasis on testing and enhance attention on other areas include requiring an application for honors that is separate from the general admissions process, interviewing prospective students, and considering a student's extracurricular excellence.

Several schools already require incoming first-year, transfer, or current students to apply for the opportunity to enroll in honors courses and receive associated benefits and resources (Willingham). Although students with exceptionally high standardized test scores may earn automatic admission to honors, an application gives students the opportunity to express for themselves how they would thrive in an honors community and to demonstrate their interest in taking deeper and more rigorous academic coursework. High school performance matters for incoming first-year students, but academic performance at college is a better reflection of a student's actual ability to perform at a high level in undergraduate coursework.

Virtual or in-person interviews for prospective honors students can be used in tandem with a direct application to help universities assess students' interest in engaging in the specialized learning opportunities provided by

honors programs. As the honors students in this study share, plenty of capable students in the general campus population could thrive in honors course-work; interviews could facilitate the admission of students whose potential contributions to the honors community are not demonstrated by their per-formance on high-stakes tests in high school.

Extracurricular involvement and achievement outside the classroom should be considered as part of the honors admissions process if it is not already integrated in a holistic review. As a way of recognizing that honors students are more than book smart but also talented musicians, artists, writ-ers, leaders, and athletes, weighing students' contributions to their university community enhances the diversity of the honors community. SAT or ACT scores cannot convey these talents.

To include underrepresented populations, particularly at PWIs, high achievement should not be characterized solely by students' performance in the classroom or testing; community involvement and demonstration of character are also important factors in determining a student's ability to achieve. Current methods of selection for honors often leave this piece out of the admissions process, potentially overlooking many qualified candidates.

CONCLUSION

Social justice requires that we do more research on Black women in honors as well as students with other social identities and that we use that new knowledge to revise terminology and inform practices that foster inclusivity and nurturing support. Not all honors students have the same definitions or perceptions about the salience of their academic identities. In our consideration of what it means to be an honors student—whether gifted, high-achieving, or something in between—we need to consider students' perceptions of the meaning and salience of their identities.

As Guzy argues in this issue, "If honors professionals are earnest in our desire to recruit and retain more gifted students, then we need to reexam-ine how we define honors education in the twenty-first century and how we should expand our definitions to more fully embrace intellectual diversity." The results of my study call for reexamination of admissions practices that exclude students who demonstrate academic talent beyond test scores as well as those who may be qualified but do not self-identify as high-achieving. Without additional knowledge about talented Black women, we risk their remaining invisible, missing out on opportunities to fulfill their potential in honors. If they are navigating their lives along the margins of the academic

and social spaces at PWIs, they could experience lasting effects on their emotional and psychological wellbeing. Identifying talented students and helping them fulfill their potential—including the Black women among them—is what honors education is all about. Let us more inclusively live our honors missions.

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