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2023

## Diversity in Honors: Understanding Systemic Biases through Student Narratives

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Singla, Aman; Melendrez, Minerva; Thai, Mable T.; Mann, Sukhdev S.; Zhong, Denise; Hoang, Kim T.; Lee, Isabella H.; and Aponte, Andrea V., "Diversity in Honors: Understanding Systemic Biases through Student Narratives" (2023). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council – Online Archive*. 766.  
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# Diversity in Honors: Understanding Systemic Biases through Student Narratives

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**Abstract:** Centered on superiority over a certain group or individual, discrimination becomes predominant in prestigious institutions that pride themselves on exclusivity. Collegiate honors programs tend to deepen this practice by creating highly elite spaces accessible only to a select few. This rigidity can lead to an underrepresentation of historically marginalized groups, students who often lack the necessary resources for achieving academic excellence. This case study examines the ways honors programs inadvertently perpetuate discrimination among different social identities. Using inductive interviewing of honors students ( $n = 12$ ) to gauge individual perceptions of program diversity, researchers rely on content analysis to generate four themes (relationship, discrimination, exclusion, conformity). By cross-analyzing participant responses with social identities, key programmatic components that may have led to covert systemic bias are uncovered. Results further indicate a possible link between a student's racial identity and their sense of belonging within the program, with people of color reporting more instances of "othering" and discrimination. This study reveals a pressing need for increasing access to honors for minority students and improving the level of integration and retention among students currently enrolled.

**Keywords:** higher education—honors programs & colleges; critical race theory; inclusive education; social belonging; University of California, Davis (CA)—Honors Program

**Citation:** *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, 2023, 24(1): 57–80

## INTRODUCTION

Recent social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and STOP ASIAN HATE have brought increasing attention to systemic inequities, advocating for the protection of diverse groups' rights. Mirroring these efforts, colleges worldwide have worked to ensure that their programs combat discrimination inherent to elitist institutions such as higher education (Bhopal, 2017). While these organizations have made substantial advancements to foster inclusivity by acknowledging unfair college admission practices and educating students on equity issues, there remains a critical need for these institutions to reconceptualize their understanding of diversity and its implementation on campus (Iverson, 2007). Collegiate honors programs serve as a prime example of an area of higher education that would benefit from a reformation. Students in honors programs have the opportunity to explore their academic interests through participation in honors courses, special projects, and research. The small size and intimate settings of honors programs also encourage students to develop social support networks with other academically oriented peers and mentorships with faculty. However, scholars acknowledge the necessity to improve the effectiveness of honors programs so that they become more cognizant of diverse student groups' needs.

Embroiled in a history of racial exclusivity, honors programs often reinforce feelings of inferiority in underrepresented students and promulgate the idea that certain groups or individuals remain superior to others (Patton, 2015). Consequently, honors programs inadvertently contribute to discrimination in education, leading to a homogeneous student demographic that needs more diversity (Reddick et al., 2017). Although honors programs allow high-achieving undergraduate students to engage in enriching educational experiences and have made an effort in recent years to promote diversity by admitting more students of color, there are still limitations that prevent them from fully achieving a genuinely egalitarian system (Chojnacki, 2019; Hébert & McBee, 2007). Thus, it is crucial to evaluate the dynamic relationship that high-achieving students of color have with the program to better understand how this connection may affect their interaction with peers, perception of academia, and academic success. Recognizing common factors among these students can provide us with knowledge of how to develop an honors program that better supports their endeavors, satisfies their distinct needs, and expands access to underrepresented students while providing a high-quality educational experience.

Our study presents a case analysis of UC Davis's University Honors Program (UHP). By focusing on twelve student narratives, we hope to better understand factors driving a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and student satisfaction within the honors program. By analyzing individual student experiences, we aim to uncover shortcomings within the UHP so that we can work collaboratively with faculty to conceptualize improvements. In satisfying these goals, we aspire to cultivate improved academic support for students of color while increasing their retention, representation, and access to higher education. We also strive to inspire other colleges to consider adopting our proposals so that they, too, can increase diversity within their honors programs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Race and Intersectionality**

Race has historically been a determinant in the social and economic stratification of different groups across the globe. The institutionalization of a racial hierarchy has led to the glorification of Eurocentric features, consequently deeming darker-skinned people as inferior (Song, 2006). Particularly in the United States, racial hierarchies have become prevalent in shaping the unequal treatment of citizens. This cultural phenomenon demonstrates the privilege associated with "whiteness," providing white individuals with hegemony while people of color remain disadvantaged, oppressed by social and political forces (Gold, 2006).

Although scholars acknowledge that race is a construct that does not wholly eradicate individual agency, meaning that marginalized groups still can advance, many still recognize its critical role in determining quality of life and upward mobility (Gold, 2006). Racial oppression has deprived minorities, predominantly Black individuals, of adequate housing, income, education, and employment opportunities (Edwards, 2008). Moreover, it has contributed to inequalities within institutions such as the labor market, the welfare system, the criminal justice system, and schools (Edwards, 2008).

However, oppression has evolved to encompass more than just skin color; it now includes other identifiers such as religion, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. In her study on oppression against African American women, Crenshaw (1989) coined the theoretical framework that examines the nexus between race, gender, and other social identities as "intersectionality." Intersectionality considers the multi-dimensionality of minority experiences,

acknowledging that identification with multiple marginalized identities exacerbates discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Examining how intersectional identities shape the structural and political experiences of people of color reveals that these individuals experience oppression within each of their marginalized identities, causing them to be “multiply-disadvantaged” (Crenshaw, 1991). The effects of intersectionality can be widespread, creating pain points in a variety of sectors such as health and finance. For example, research indicates that multiply disadvantaged individuals experience decreased access to healthcare and capital, poorer psychological well-being, and lower job autonomy (Simatele & Kabange, 2022; Brown & Moloney, 2019; Turan et al., 2019). Particularly in higher education, intersectionality can manifest in decreased academic participation and increased feelings of isolation and hostility (Mirza, 2018; Nichols & Stahl, 2019). Nevertheless, by viewing higher education through an intersectional lens, individuals can challenge the invisibility and preconceived notions of certain identities (Nichols & Stahl, 2019).

### **Race in Theory: Critical Race Theory and LatCrit**

One ideology that has emerged from analyzing sociocultural dynamics is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Through an analysis of historical context and social milieu, CRT emphasizes that racism has been institutionalized in all facets of our daily lives and works against communities of color (Stovall, 2006). Furthermore, the concept characterizes “colorblind” or “race-neutral” policies as a false reality that seeks to cover up the disproportionate treatment of different racial groups. CRT postulates that these viewpoints are often supported by the dominant racial group, white individuals, to marginalize the suffering of the non-dominant group, people of color. The theory’s central premise is to deconstruct the legal system by studying the overt and subtle racism that has been attributed to a “white” bias (Parker, 2003). In academia, this idea translates into an educational system based on “white student behavior.” CRT proposes that these ideals have permeated the social culture, calling for scrutiny of our everyday behaviors and interactions. Success in this endeavor requires using experiences with racial bias to advance societal changes and take apart the current structures of systemic bias that exist.

However, CRT faces criticism for its theory on systemic racism and its strategy for deconstructing these biases. Subsequently, an alternative approach has stemmed from an updated conceptualization of Marxism. Unlike CRT, Neo-Marxism contends that racism is a theory or perspective

rather than a material concept (Parker, 2003). The ideology focuses on how the global economy has affected different social communities—something CRT is accused of failing to acknowledge (Parker & Stovall, 2004). The central focus of Neo-Marxism lies in examining how capitalism has induced social marginalization, presenting the intersection between class and different racial communities. On the contrary, CRT seems to focus solely on racialized politics (Parker & Stovall, 2004). Neo-Marxism posits that to remove racism, we must rid ourselves of the necessary texts, narratives, and ideas that give racism meaning whereas CRT focuses on the structural aspects of society and how they promote discrimination (Cole, 2012).

Rather than working only as an individual theory, CRT has also been used with other ideologies, providing the foundation for new theories such as LatCrit. This ideology focuses explicitly on the Latinx community, targeting parallels between race, language, immigration, ethnicity, and culture (Villalpando, 2004). Specifically, LatCrit centralizes the oppression of Latinx students and the effect of this bias on the pedagogy these students receive in school. Consequently, it highlights the educational barriers Latino students are prone to face.

## **Methodologies for Understanding Race Theories**

A widely used research method for analyzing the strengths and shortcomings of social theories is *testimonia*. *Testimonia* is the approach of recounting the story of another individual. In *testimonia*, an individual details their story to a “translator,” who then analyzes and portrays it via academic norms for publication. Specifically, in LatCrit, this approach has proven critical in determining the causes of certain struggles the Latino community faces, such as social marginalization leading to decreased academic success (Salinas, 2017).

Despite the wide use of *testimonia*, its qualitative nature has been criticized for not having as much accuracy as quantitative data analysis. However, in sociological research, qualitative data adds value by capturing nuances in real-life experiences.

Particularly, qualitative data brings to light the overt racism in our society through the holistic treatment of individual and active participation validation techniques. For example, LatCrit looks beyond internal factors when gauging Latinos’ educational struggles, understanding that external forces, such as student treatment, dramatically affect outcomes. Therefore, open-ended interviewing such as *testimonia* is a must in empowering individuals while exploring systemic inequities that have long suppressed individuals.

## Extant Research on Diversity in Honors

Reconceptualizing honors is not a novel proposal; prior research on diversity within collegiate programs has demonstrated the positive outcomes associated with rethinking curriculum and structure. One aspect of honors practices that scholars primarily criticize for contributing to inequity includes the process for admissions. The focus on standardized scores such as GPA and SAT for admittance creates a “culture of elitism” that generally benefits privileged students with the financial means to satisfy these criteria (Frost, 2019). Consequently, the “honors profile” is often “disproportionately drawn from White, Asian, and higher socioeconomic status backgrounds,” leaving marginalized students excluded from academic opportunities for future success (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2019, p. 149). To rectify the underrepresentation that admissions practices may have caused, many programs have begun to adopt a more holistic approach when selecting students. For example, Pavlis Honors College at Michigan Technological University diversified their program by eliminating standardized test scores and lowering the GPA requirement (Frost, 2019). Likewise, Yarrison (2019) proposes considering broader intellectual attributes beyond standardization that reflect imagination, originality, and persistence. She contends that this approach may include considering students who “made a Youtube video that went viral . . . started a business or founded a nonprofit . . . completed an Eagle Scout or Girl Scout Gold Award project . . . completed a military mission before the age of twenty-one . . . [or] put together a garage band” (Yarrison, 2019, p. 31).

Among scholars, other concerns arise about considering extracurricular involvement for admission and whether it limits inclusiveness. Badenhausen (2018) emphasizes that relying on volunteer service to increase admissions diversity can have the opposite effect since disadvantaged students often must dedicate leisure time to caretaking or working to help support their family. Thus, honors faculty should aim to understand students’ different living circumstances and consider the challenges they may have overcome to attain higher education (Badenhausen, 2018). Inclusive admissions can consider the distinct responsibilities, such as employment, in which minority students must partake to help support their families and the corresponding time consumption (Mead, 2018).

Another avenue for reconfiguring honors includes shifting the language often used by staff to describe honors students. In her research, Davis (2018) finds that students of color, particularly Black high-achieving women, prefer not to be labeled “gifted” or “academically talented” since these words are



more suggestive of innate ability and disregard the hardships overcome to achieve this status. Using descriptive words suggesting natural ability instead of grit can imply a privileged status that may alienate marginalized students who feel that they do not have such privilege (Davis, 2018).

Many programs have taken to restructuring curricula to include more discussions on social justice and intersectionality. For example, Woodard (2019) describes how she facilitated student consideration of diversity, inclusivity, and representation issues by assigning a TV Pitch Project that examines media representation of intersectional perspectives. She highlights that creative exploration provides a space for students to expand on social justice and conceptualize visions of progress (Woodard, 2019). Additionally, Loyola University's honors program exemplifies how to uniquely embed social justice pedagogy through experiential learning and participatory research. Specifically, Loyola created a sociology seminar that required students and faculty to work alongside community partners, such as a local homeless resource center (Voigt, 2018). By going beyond the classroom, students and staff become aware of social justice issues in their community, equipping them with motivation to become active agents of change.

Although honors programs have made substantial headway in increasing diversity, work remains to be done. A primary concern plaguing honors faculty includes how to successfully integrate underrepresented students once they are in the program. Yarrison (2019) emphasizes that recruitment of marginalized students can often make them feel like "second-hand" citizens who view themselves as incapable of performing equally to traditional students. To combat this self-perception, researchers have suggested implementing more relation-building activities such as anti-bias training in staff, behavioral and mental health first-aid training, workshops for anti-stress activities, and links to local counseling, disability resources, low-cost medical care, job-listings, domestic violence centers, and food pantry services (Yavneh Klos, 2019). Other ideas for increased integration include a peer mentorship program that reinforces community values, creating a coalition of diverse profiles working together to achieve a common purpose (Watkins, 2020).

Our goal is that through investigating the unique experiences of Davis's honors students, we can explore methods to foster inclusivity and support for admitted minorities while also discovering strategies for increasing the general representation of historically marginalized groups.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Purpose

This study conducts a narrative investigation of honors students' experiences with diversity within UC Davis's University Honors Program (UHP). Using qualitative analysis, our research relies on inductive questioning to comprehend participants' attitudes toward the UHP's efforts to integrate underrepresented students. Through this assessment, we seek to gauge the program's success in the admission and integration of minority groups. By sharing our findings with the program, we hope to encourage a reconceptualization of diversity so that minority students can feel active support and a greater sense of belonging.

### Participants

Our target population for this study is UC Davis's University Honors Program student population during the 2020–2021 academic year. The overall demographic breakdown for the UHP includes 692 students ranging from first to fourth years. Approximately 24% of these students come from a minority racial group, which encompasses African American/Black, American Indian/Alaska Native/Pacific Islander, and Chicanx/Latinx groups. In addition, 31% of the total students are first-generation college students, and 27% come from low-income households.

The current study aims to mirror these demographics. The sample includes twelve students, of whom approximately 14% identify with an underrepresented racial group, 18% are first-generation college students, and 18% are from low-income households. Regarding sex and gender, 91% of participants identify as female, and 18% identify with the LGBTQ community.

Participants are further distinguished as either first-year or on-campus admits. First-year admits are students who, in addition to being admitted into UC Davis, received an invitation to become a student in the honors program. These students were recruited by admissions officers prior to beginning their first quarter at Davis. On-campus admits include select first-year students who were encouraged to apply to the program at the end of their first year; their selection was contingent on completion of open-ended essays and a letter of recommendation. Among the 2020–2021 UHP population, 77% are first-year students while 17% are on-campus admits. The remaining 6% includes transfer students, who are not included in our sample because they

have less experience in our program than the others. Within our study, 58.4% are first-year students while 41.6% are on-campus admits.

Participants were recruited via advertising through UHP networks. Students were then selected through criterion-based sampling that requires them to be in either their third- or fourth-year studies. This criterion is essential to ensure that students have had sufficient interactions within the program to inform their reflection. Furthermore, our sample relies on participation through self-selection given the need for students' willingness to share personal experiences.

## **Research Procedure**

Data was gathered from individual student interviews. Inductive questioning determined students' opinions toward the UHP's academics and diversity. Interviewers consisted of current UHP students, ranging from first- to fourth-year students. Prior to conducting the interviews, interviewers were educated on inductive interviewing and were provided with opening questions to start the conversation.

One-hour interviews were held over Zoom and followed a conversational, testimonia-based style. Once participants had fulfilled the interviewing phase of the study, they completed a post-interview survey inquiring about their gender, religion, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and any additional identifiers they found to inform their responses.

The research team then performed a content analysis of the narrative data, extracting common ideas that frequently emerged among students' responses. The researchers then consolidated these ideas into four overarching themes, cross-analyzing students' perceptions of UHP diversity with their post-interview responses. The themes include faculty relationships, underrepresentation of minority students, student disconnect from the honors program, and how elitism induces conformity among high-achieving students of color.

## **RESULTS**

The subsequent paragraphs identify four key themes that capture the most commonly occurring attitudes expressed amongst the twelve students' interviews. These themes serve to typify the general relationship between the UC Davis University Honors Program and its student body.

## **Theme 1.**

### **The UHP Contributes Positively through Faculty Relationships, Peer Support, and the Currant Hall Environment**

A nontrivial number of participants credited their positive experiences in the honors program to the UHP environment, highlighting how a combination of faculty, peers, and the general community facilitated a strong sense of belonging.

Specifically, first-year students noted that the honors program helped them transition from high school to college. They described how living in Currant Hall (the dormitory exclusive to first-year honors students) encouraged them to step outside their comfort zone and explore their limits while being secure in their surroundings. Many attribute this sense of security to the residence hall's support system of resident advisors and honors peers. One student shared that even as a senior, the initial friend group she established as a first-year honors student remains her primary social group. A handful of the first-year students attributed their tight-knit relationships to Currant Hall, citing that the opportunity to live with their peers cultivated a sense of intimacy among them.

Most of the participants who were on-campus admits missed out on this core bonding experience, but they cited different factors for stimulating community and belonging. Their connections primarily stemmed from their interactions with UHP faculty, with whom many kept in touch even after leaving or graduating from the program. One student expressed that his honors courses were the first academic environment in which he was taught by a minority professor. He continued by informing the interviewer that seeing someone with a similar background in a position of high status fostered his comfort in and appreciation of the program. Still, most of the on-campus admits expressed regret for not being able to live in Currant Hall, which they felt led to feelings of alienation. Comments about the UHP learning environment demonstrate that, unlike first-year students who often cite peer support as one of the most important aspects of the program, on-campus admits tend to focus more on faculty support as a primary benefit. Nevertheless, first-years also appreciated the faculty, highlighting their willingness to provide support outside the classroom as important to learning.

Another aspect of UHP that many participants believed contributed positively to their honors experience included the honors courses. With small class sizes and discussion-based lectures, many interviewees believed that the course structures allowed strong connections between faculty and students

to flourish. They also mentioned that the program requirements, consisting of honors courses, a Signature Work senior project, and community service, provided unique experiences that helped develop critical research skills and a professional network. Overall, most participants agreed that the UHP offered ways for students with different career goals to advance academically and professionally.

## **Theme 2.**

### **Students Have Experienced Some Form of Discrimination in the UHP Environment**

A notable number of participant narratives described a situation in which they had experienced some form of discrimination within the UHP environment. We define discrimination as covert and direct prejudicial treatment, which can range from microaggressions to blatant antagonism.

We found that most discrimination was connected to the individual's racial or gender identity. A smaller portion of discriminatory experiences stemmed from more nuanced attributes such as the individual's language barrier or religious identity. Although some participants believed that discrimination might not have been intentional, they still recalled being overcome by discomfort and offense, indicating that many of these instances were microaggressions. However, a few students informed the interviewers that some inappropriate comments they received were intentionally directed toward their personal identifiers, raising concerns about the sociocultural cognizance and respect for differences emphasized within the program.

Additionally, our findings indicated a connection between discriminatory experiences and on-campus admits as a significantly larger number of reports came from this group of interviewees. Demographically, the on-campus cohort consisted of more minority students than the first-year admits, who shared greater instances of gender-based discrimination.

## **Theme 3.**

### **Experiences in the UHP Foster a Disconnect within the Program that Results in the Formation of an In-Group Versus Out-Group Mentality**

Several comments discussed how the UHP experience led to exclusion and disconnection from the general UC Davis student population and the program itself. A handful of participants claimed that being labeled as

“honors” often created a stigma that hindered integration into the broader campus community and led them to disassociate from the UHP to fit in better.

Feelings of exclusion were cited almost unanimously within the second-year cohort, again calling into question the program’s ability to integrate on-campus admits. By their senior year, on-campus admits still reported feeling ostracized, demonstrating that the emotion endured for an extended period, not just upon initial admission. The frequency with which exclusion was mentioned among this cohort reinforces the notion that honors has failed to create a welcoming environment for certain students, causing disengagement.

Although the UHP’s structure fosters a tight-knit academic community, interviewees indicated that it is fostered in a way that consequently excludes others. Some students felt that faculty themselves promoted exclusionary behavior by building their learning expectations around rigid intellectualism instead of personal exploration. Moreover, many participants mentioned that the UHP pushed them toward a particular path instead of supporting their personal ambitions, creating disillusionment about the program’s purpose.

Another variable that participants identified as a cause for their exclusion included the lack of cultural diversity within the honors population. Many minority participants felt they lacked representation within the program, causing them to stand out in the community. One student shared how her socioeconomic background made her feel disconnected since she came from a working-class family while most of her peers were middle to upper-middle class. Because of this upbringing, she often felt judged for not being as academically and professionally versed as other UHP students appeared to be. Underrepresented participants also described how being a minority can sometimes feel like a burden since they feel pressured to represent certain perspectives. One student mentioned that during classroom discussions, they felt coerced to represent the BIPOC voice when covering a lesson on gender and sexuality, making them feel like an outsider.

As a result of the disconnect, several participants admitted to having considered leaving the program. For these individuals, deliberation centered on the idea that the program was strictly a means for gaining academic opportunities instead of building relationships. Hence, once this academic goal was achieved, many felt no genuine appeal to continue. Specifically, one student discussed feeling that the UHP forced them to constantly confront unfair attitudes and standards, causing them to question the program’s value since they believed it was not worth going through the strife. This opinion was seemingly

exacerbated by the UHP's rigorous and tight-flow curriculum, which had failed to contribute any substance to their life, augmenting the disconnect.

#### **Theme 4.**

### **The UHP Imposes a Conforming Attitude toward Students' Professional Ambitions**

The final theme emerging from our interviews involved the belief that UHP stymied progress toward career goals by imposing a predetermined professional pathway on students. Students often cited feeling pressured to pursue a career in a STEM field instead of the liberal arts, creating conflict with their passion. One student described that being a student-athlete caused her to be viewed stereotypically within the honors community; her peers did not seem to think that she was as academically capable because of her status. She also noticed that within the program, there was an underlying rhetoric about enrolling in graduate school to achieve a meaningful career.

Only minority participants expressed an identity conflict between their personal values and those promoted by the honors program. Meanwhile, traditional honors students mainly commented on the strictness of the academic environment, not mentioning the impact of the UHP's academic values on their identity.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Theme 1**

Many comments regarding the program's academic and living environment provide evidence that first-year admits have a vastly different experience in the UHP program than on-campus admits, with on-campus admits having a weaker sense of belonging within the honors community. One possible explanation for such differences includes on-campus admits' infrequent exposure to peers outside the classroom. Since Currant Hall houses only first-year students, on-campus admits rarely access the living hall, so they lack the opportunity to develop friendships beyond the academic environment. Not being able to establish personal relationships with honors classmates could help explain the difference in outlook between the two groups.

Additionally, on-campus admits' claims of differential treatment, which they believed stemmed from their status, could explain why this cohort feels a decreased sense of belonging. On-campus admits tend to experience heightened levels of imposter syndrome due to later admission, and these feelings



can trigger confirmation bias that works to affirm such beliefs of differential treatment (Thomas et al., 2019). Confirmation bias is a psychological phenomenon in which an individual deliberately focuses on information that supports their beliefs, often leading to a misconstrued reality (Nickerson, 1998). Hence, imposter syndrome may already cause on-campus admits to feel unequal to their peers, and confirmation bias leads them to focus on situations in which they perceived differential treatment. Regardless of the root cause of their decreased sense of belonging, the negative opinions expressed in alignment with Theme 1 call into question the program's success in integrating students, particularly on-campus admits, who, based on the UHP's demographic data, tend to consist of more minority students than the first-year admits.

A potential suggestion for addressing this issue and improving the integration of underrepresented students includes a program that pairs on-campus admits with first-year admits, creating friend groups that can help increase their sense of belonging within the community.

Demographic data suggesting that minorities have a decreased likelihood of being admitted as first-year students proves a need to increase accessibility to the program. The extant literature emphasizes how marginalized students are deprived of access to honors because admissions practices rely heavily on GPA and standardized test scores. Research demonstrates that admission standards are heavily biased toward privileged students who have the resources to meet these criteria (Yarrison, 2019). Although UC Davis's honors program has addressed this concern in the past by shifting its admission criteria to be more holistic, studies show that even when considering extracurricular achievements, nontraditional students remain at a disadvantage since they must often dedicate any leisure time toward supporting their family (Badenhausen, 2018). By considering students' backgrounds and the sacrifices required to access higher education, admissions can become more focused on resilience as opposed to achievement, which could potentially assist in increasing diversity.

## **Theme 2**

Most participants who reported instances of discrimination believed that prejudicial treatment may have been unintentional, suggesting that offenders most likely did not view their commentary as harmful or hostile. Although microaggressions are typically subtle and not indicative of malice, their occurrence reveals colorblindness, a misunderstanding of privilege and



power dynamics, a disregard for marginalized identities' history with oppression, and implicit racial bias (Kanter et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2013). Hence, regardless of the intent of such behavior, the frequency with which microaggressions were mentioned across the sample draws attention to a lack of sociocultural consideration among some peers. Possible solutions for combatting microaggressions within the community include greater emphasis on peer empathy, increased discussions on marginalization and social justice, and acknowledgment of one's privilege and power.

Our results show that although first-years experienced less gender-based discrimination than second-years, reports of racial discrimination remained higher within this group, with Asian American and Hispanic respondents being the primary targets. Possible explanations for this trend include a racialized climate coupled with a general lack of social exposure among new college students (McClelland & Linnander, 2006). Furthermore, UHP demographic data shows that first-years tend to be predominantly white, with underrepresented minorities constituting less than 20% of the population. Thus, a general lack of diversity may contribute to homogeneity in cultural perspectives, explaining why students may need more exposure and understanding of certain cultural values or practices. This lack of awareness can translate into commentary that fails to understand differences among identities, resulting in difficulty identifying what questions about identity are inappropriate. To address this issue, the UHP should focus on increasing the representation of minority students. One potential solution for addressing underrepresentation is the creation of student diversity boards that serve as liaisons between students and faculty. By creating an integrated face within the program, professors and administrators can better understand diverse students' needs while supporting them academically and emotionally and can also further increase representation. Allowing minority students to see high-achieving individuals like themselves take up nontraditional spaces can inspire and motivate them to persist in higher education, subsequently increasing retention.

### **Theme 3**

The data on participants' self-identification with the honors program indicate that approximately half of the interviewees did not disclose their honors status with non-UHP peers for fear of stigmatization. When asking interviewees about their reasoning for nondisclosure, we discovered that almost all participants failing to identify with the UHP did so because it would come off as pretentious, thus hindering their ability to connect with

peers outside of the honors environment. The belief that the UHP might strain relationships raises concerns about the program's reputation. The program's history of biased exclusionary practices coupled with its general lack of diversity may lead its members to believe that associating with the institution can cause them to be viewed in a similarly negative light. As a result, they may either avoid mentioning their honors status or instead choose to mingle exclusively with peers from the program to avoid judgment on their character (Rinn, 2004). The consequence of these circumstances is the development of an in-group vs. out-group mentality.

Additionally, our findings show that the disconnect is more predominant among on-campus than first-year admits, indicating that the UHP may fail to implement integrative strategies for fostering a sense of belonging and support among this cohort. Given that on-campus admits have a higher percentage of minority students, our data shows that although accessibility may be increasing, inclusivity remains stagnant. Moreover, our participants' responses emphasize that the program should strive to redefine their understanding of diversity and inclusivity; these values should not be interpreted as mere guidelines or abstract concepts but instead be perceived and practiced as an active effort to make specific groups feel greater acceptance. Overall, the UHP must strive to make underrepresented students feel included since failure could lead them to view themselves as an "afterthought," producing feelings of inadequacy (Morales, 2014).

Our minority participants shared that a root cause of their alienation was lack of representation, citing that the program's largely non-minority constituency pressured them to represent a particular perspective. The notion that a lack of diversity burdens minorities with the responsibility of representing marginalized perspectives has been coined as "tokenism" (Scott, 2017). This phenomenon is most frequently experienced by Black people and is exemplified in professional environments such as honors courses, offices, or learning centers since these spaces were not originally created for the active participation of marginalized individuals (Scott, 2017). In academia, tokenism can result in a hostile environment for underrepresented students and the development of negative feelings toward their identity since they feel like outcasts. Additionally, a lack of representation of certain identities can create homogeneity within the student population that leads to an "echo chamber." The overwhelming consensus of viewpoints can flush out the opportunity for diverse representation, leading to further feelings of isolation.

Many participants experienced thoughts of leaving the program, prompting concerns over the effectiveness of honors in cultivating an intimate and

enriching educational experience. Many respondents cited that completing academic goals prompted their consideration to leave, suggesting that they saw the UHP as a primarily academic rather than social environment. Since the honors program prides itself on being a tight-knit living community, faculty must envision ways to promote stronger social connectivity to manifest this value.

#### **Theme 4**

Regarding the belief that UHP imposes a predetermined path for its students, results indicate that only minority participants tied this sentiment to their sociocultural identity. In contrast, non-minority participants believed this imposition only applied to their academics. This distinction highlights that while the UHP's value are seen as generally appropriate among all our participants, minority students view the program's values to be in direct conflict with their personal beliefs.

Underrepresented students' view of the UHP as antithetical to their identity again calls into question the program's success in fostering an accepting and inclusive environment; it demonstrates that elitism continues to taint the reputation of honors. Demographic data and student perspectives emphasize that the program remains an exclusive space for certain groups, causing them to feel that they must either conform to its culture or remain discordant from the community. These beliefs call into question the UHP's ability to actively support and integrate already admitted minority students, reiterating the notion that to honors, "diversity" may be nothing more than a standard to satisfy (Dotter, 2019).

One possible strategy for mitigating feelings of conformity and estrangement includes creating values demonstrative of cultural awareness, such as focusing less on academic achievement and more on community service and collectivism. Implementing this shift in honors values could help marginalized students view themselves as more aligned with the program since studies show that high academic achievement is more telling of access to resources than of capability. Additionally, since many minority cultures emphasize the importance of collectivism in their practices, underrepresented students may better resonate with the program if they see this value being reflected within the honors culture.

Regarding the general student belief that the UHP caters more to STEM majors, a practical fix could be for the program to offer an equal number of liberal arts and STEM courses. Since UC Davis's honors program tends to

offer a disproportionate number of courses that largely satisfy the science and engineering GE requirements instead of liberal arts and social sciences, it is not surprising that respondents felt a specific path was being imposed on them. By equalizing the topical breadth of course offerings, students might feel more passionate about their academics and thus more supported to pursue their personal interests.

## LIMITATIONS

Given our small sample set, our findings are not representative of general honors populations, and the results may only partially capture the breadth of experience that some students experience in the program since there is a lack of variation across several key demographics in the sample. Latinx/Chicanx individuals are the only minority racial group included in the respondents, so the study fails to account for other racial minority groups' attitudes and perceptions. Additionally, since female respondents far outweighed male respondents, the data cannot be generalized.

Furthermore, the means for acquiring our sample may have introduced selection bias as students with particular grievances might have been more likely to volunteer for this study. This bias is potentially reflected in the overrepresentation of on-campus admits within our study. Hence, selection bias may have disproportionately inflated the overall perceived discrimination within the program, making the results nongeneralizable. Lastly, since results were based on narrative accounts from UHP individuals, interpretive bias in which ambiguous scenarios are processed as hostile or discriminatory may have occurred.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of this study, including its focus on a small number of honors students at a single institution, our questions and resulting data provide potentially important directions for honors at colleges and universities other than UC Davis.

Honors programs originated to provide exclusive access to higher education to a selective group of privileged individuals, ensuring the exclusion of other marginalized groups (Cognard-Black & Spisak, 2021; Reddick et al., 2017). The repercussions of this practice are still evident in our institution's demographics, as minority groups remain vastly underrepresented. Specifically, fewer than 1% of honors students are African American while an

overwhelming majority are Caucasian. Furthermore, minority students who are admitted still struggle to complete the program and feel accepted, demonstrating the need for honors to reform its admission practices and standards to create a more inclusive and socially aware environment.

Our study provided a platform for students' narratives, allowing us to understand how diversity is incorporated within the University Honors Program at UC Davis. Among the twelve students who participated, there does appear to be some relationship between racial background and a sense of belonging in honors, showing that the program needs to work toward cultivating inclusivity. Research shows that students who feel included are positively correlated with increased enjoyment and motivation in their activities, allowing them to better flourish in their environments (Pedler et al., 2021; Goodenow et al., 2010). In academia, these social experiences can lead to more favorable educational outcomes and an overall positive student sentiment. Hence, understanding which determinants of social belonging most contribute to student satisfaction could help us comprehend the programmatic features that are best suited to benefit underrepresented students.

However, future work must be done to further investigate and solidify the connection between student identity and the collegiate honors program experience. Despite lacking substantive data, we were able to cross-analyze common interview themes revealing a need to improve resource allocation, faculty training and diversity, and program access to minority student groups. We also discovered that current program guidelines must be restructured to be more responsive to diverse students' backgrounds and needs. Although our study offers guidance for Davis's honors program, we believe that other colleges nationwide could similarly benefit from applying these recommendations. For example, we urge honors faculty to reconceptualize their admissions practices to consider a student's entire journey toward higher education, grounding the application within their personal circumstances. To strengthen students' sense of belonging, honors programs can also take the time to honor cultural traditions and customs through celebratory social events. Our final recommendation includes creating a student diversity liaison that promotes sustained faculty understanding of the student voice. With these changes, we believe it would be possible to reduce the negative experiences among students within the program and contribute to greater educational outcomes, higher retention rates, and increased institutional satisfaction among students of color.

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