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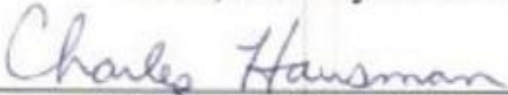
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE HONORS PROGRAM
AT AN APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

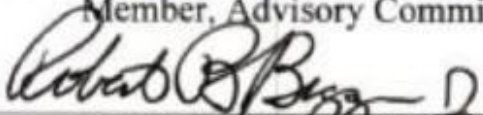
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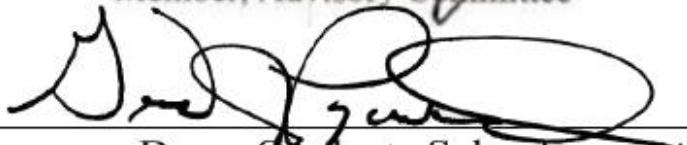
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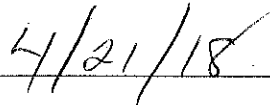
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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE HONORS PROGRAM
AT AN APPALACHIAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BY

MELISSA R. HELTON

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION
May, 2018

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Judith Jane Jorgenrud,
the woman who gave me life, opportunity, and support.

Thank you for making education a priority, momma.

And in memory of Helen Britton Jorgenrud, the grandmother
I never got to meet, university librarian and first in the family
to earn a college degree, in 1938 from Toledo University.

And, always, to my daughters Kelsey Pearl and Violet Abigail.

Every moment is a classroom and every person a teacher.

Our job is to be diligent and joyful students. I know you will be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their incalculable encouragement and help.

First and foremost, my husband Keith Helton, who for 20 years has been my foundation, guide, and champion: There is no way to quantify or express how much you have helped me create my life. You know. Your fingerprints are on every beautiful and good thing I do. Thank you.

Violet and Kelsey Helton: Thank you girls for being patient with me while I was going to school and doing this dissertation. Thank you so much for your help and encouragement when I was needing it. You girls were my motivation to do this, and I love you bigger than the sky. Now, you will have to call me Doctor Mom. :)

Chloè McMurray, deepest friend: Thank you for your boundless reassurance and assistance during this process. Thank you for being you. I'm so happy you're in my world.

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Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College: Thank you for the professional development opportunity to pursue my doctorate, the permission to study our honors program, and mostly, the joy of working with these students. Thank you for entrusting me with the responsibility of building education in our corner of Appalachia, and for the privilege of leading the Southeast Honors Program.

And of course, my students: Thank you for your honesty and trust. Thank you for being my co-explorers and my teachers. I am honored to be part of your journey, and I am so excited to see where you go after your brief stop in my classroom.

ABSTRACT

Gifted students in the United States are often underserved. Collegiate honors programs are a proven way to provide for gifted students' special needs. Many gifted students attend community colleges, and these institutions have a set of challenges to starting and maintaining thriving honors programs, including accusations of elitism and lack of resources. Community colleges in Appalachia have an additional set of challenges to face, including high proportions of first-generation students, rurality, and poverty. Efforts for thriving honors programs need to be effective and efficient at meeting gifted students' needs, but there is little research on the programs at these institutions and how students perceive their experiences.

This study is a qualitative case study of the honors program at a small, rural, Appalachian community college in Kentucky. The aim of the study is to assess how students in the program perceive the degree to which the program is meeting their intellectual, social, and professional needs. Students were interviewed with open-ended questions about their experiences in their honors program, including why they joined, the positive aspects, and what needs improvement.

It is found that overall, students positively perceived their experience with the honors program, particularly the interdisciplinary discussion format to the coursework, meeting students from other campuses, relationships with faculty, opportunity for travel, and professional development. The negative perceptions students identified were need for more funding and resources, help with transfer to senior institutions, and challenges with honors contract classes.

More research into the intersection of gifted students, honors programs, community colleges, and Appalachia is needed to adequately meet the needs of this underserved population. In order to fulfil their social contract of serving the educational needs of their communities, community colleges should offer thriving honors programs for their gifted students, especially in Appalachia, where other opportunities can be severely limited.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As Rogers (2007) indicates in a summary of research on gifted education spanning from 1861 to 2007, gifted students and honors education are well-researched topics. Gifted student research reports that these students are an underserved population due to unmet needs in the standard classroom (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008; Luhman & Fundis, 1989; McKeague, 1984). Since gifted students learn in a different way than other students (U.S. Department of Education, 1993; Van Tassel-Baska, 2013), honors programs can meet the needs of this student population at the college level. However, educators must make sure these programs are achieving critical goals. When looking at community colleges, there are challenges in establishing and maintaining honors programs (Bentley-Baker, 1983; Kane, 2001). Community colleges in the Appalachian region of the United States often have additional hurdles to meet the needs of gifted students (Kaplan & Van Tassel-Baska, 2010; Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015). This is a qualitative phenomenological study about the perceptions of Appalachian community college honors students and their intellectual, social, and professional needs in their honors programs.

Statement of the Problem

Russo (2001) compiled a history of the gifted education movement in the United States, beginning in 1931 when the U.S. Department of Education put forth a Section on Exceptional Children and Youth, which provided a foundation for educational policy for gifted students. The National Science Foundation Act of 1950 promoted programs and

projects to improve curriculum in schools, partially with the purpose of encouraging gifted students to consider science and math careers. During the McCarthy era, the nation suffered a wave of anti-intellectualism which caused a decrease in gifted education programs. Then, during the Brown vs. Board of Education era, most national focus was on segregation in schools. For the next several years, the national focus was on students with disabilities and their educational rights and the responsibility of public education for accommodation. Further, with the passage of The Gifted and Talented Children's Education Assistance Act, which President Nixon signed into law in 1970, there was the first federal definition of *gifted* and the law called for programs to serve these students, and made those programs eligible for federal funds. President Ford expanded federal involvement by creating the Office of Gifted and Talented, which operated within the U.S. Office of Education, and made funds available for projects, research, and training for gifted students. Under President Reagan, federal funding was suspended during much of the 1980s. Then, due to concerns of a *rising tide of mediocrity*, the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act was passed in 1988. In 2001, the Gifted and Talented Education Act expanded programs again. However, a decade later, the Javits Act was cut out of the federal budget (Winkler & Jolly, 2011). The TALENT (To Aid Gifted and High-Ability Learners by Empowering the Nation's Teachers) ACT was introduced in the House of Representatives in 2015, which called for better identification of gifted students and teacher training. As of February 2017, no further action had been taken on this bill (Congress, 2016).

As the timeline above demonstrates, the federal government has fluctuated in its commitment to gifted students. Amidst all of these fluctuations, American gifted students

have been adequately served (or not), have succeeded (or not), and currently, these students face an uncertain future in our 2017 political climate. In a nation concerned with equity in education, the U.S. must be concerned with the gifted student population.

Lichtman (2013) believes that it is important that a qualitative researcher self-reflect as a way to convey the researcher's self-awareness and how their own experiences can influence their research. As an educator who works with gifted students through an Appalachian community college honors program, this topic is very important to me. My spouse was a gifted student, and now our own children are in the gifted classification. I have seen first-hand how our public education system from kindergarten up through college deals with, and often neglects, our gifted students. It is critical that public education help all students achieve their potential, from the students who are behind and need to catch up to their grade standards, to the academically well-prepared learners, to those who fall within the gifted classification. But with limited resources, choices have to be made. Thus, our gifted and talented students frequently coast through, usually earning high grades, but never pushed or challenged as are other students. We grow and learn at the *edge* of our ability, but these underserved gifted students are not receiving an education at their edge. Imagine an Olympic runner leisurely jogging every day for training. This athlete will never surpass their previous skill if not encouraged to meet their absolute capability. I have personally witnessed how gifted students, when just coasting through year after year, become bored or even bitter toward school when their needs are not met. Gifted students can become academically and intellectually lazy when learning is effortless, preventing them from developing skills needed for challenging work. I have seen, through my college's honors program and my family, how gifted

individuals' learning can become expansive when it is activated by experiences that engage the students' needs. As an educator, I can only wonder what can be more meaningful to our vocation than helping others fall in love with learning. I am cognizant of my positionality as a mother, wife, and educator of gifted individuals, thus I am aware that during this study I must be mindful of possible subjectivity and eliminate bias by carefully using the words of those who participate in this inquiry as data, with limited summary and interpretation of the study participants' words.

Gifted students are defined by a common set of characteristics, including speed of learning, strong memory skills, inquisitive nature, and ability to see connections (McKeague, 1984; Trna, 2014). College honors programs are created to serve these particular students. The programs have admission requirements that generally focus on GPA and/or ACT/SAT scores, include an application essay and entrance interview, or other entrance criteria (Outcalt, 1999a). Once the students are in an honors program, it is important to assess to ensure their needs are met--the program's primary goal. When thinking of underserved student populations, it is common to think of students with disabilities, those who are minorities, or those who live in poverty. However, gifted students are in addition an underserved population (Eckes, n.d.; Seely, 2004) although initially it may not seem so since they often earn superior grades and are succeeding academically.

Due to challenges specific to community colleges, such a high percentage of students needing developmental classes, low completion rates, funding cuts, and more, honors programs at these institutions have a layer of challenges when it comes to functioning successfully—and even more so with community colleges in Appalachian

counties (Belcastro, 2002; Kaplan & Van Tassel-Baska, 2010). A large percentage of the Appalachian counties struggle with poverty (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2001), low high school graduation rates (Haaga, 2004), unemployment (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2001), and the characteristics of rural communities (Belcastro, 2002), such as poor digital infrastructure and population loss (Carr & Kefalas, 2009). These factors can make it difficult for Appalachian community colleges to establish and maintain honors programs for their gifted students, and therefore, it is essential that efforts in these programs are effective and efficient.

After a review of the research on gifted education, Lawrence (2009) states that “The fragmentary nature of the existing literature” demands more research to fill in the many gaps (p. 489). Along with other subtopics, there is little research focusing on honors programs at Appalachian community colleges, and it is difficult to decipher from the literature whether these colleges are achieving their goals. For example, when searching for previous published works, typing *honors programs* into an academic database offered 3,169 results. When typing in *honors programs AND United States*, the results were 1,845. Finally, typing *honors programs AND Appalachia*, there were only 17 publications, and several of those were not talking about honors programs *in* Appalachia, but rather honors programs as one subject and Appalachia as another. There is a gap in the knowledge as to how students perceive their experience in these honors programs and whether students feel their needs are being met. Research reports that students’ perception of their educational experiences impacts academic performance (Wayne, Fortner, Kitzes, Timm & Kalishman, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation inquiry is a qualitative study to understand student perceptions of a community college honors program. Participant students from a small Appalachian community college were asked to discuss their experiences and perspectives about their honors program—specifically, how their honors program does or does not accommodate their specific needs that current published research indicates are common to gifted students. These needs include class pace, self-direction of topics, and meaningful connections in the curriculum, interaction with peers, faculty/student interaction, extracurricular opportunities, and transfer to senior institutions.

In addition to the absence of research, this dissertation study is important because community colleges in Appalachia have multiple challenges for establishing and maintaining honors programs; therefore all efforts need to be effective and achieve set goals. The institution studied can benefit considerably from the data and analysis collected since it could facilitate an examination of program characteristics. Other institutions can also benefit from this in-depth case study to reflect upon their existing programs or to help guide the development of a new program. As themes emerged through study interviews, policy concerns became apparent and can contribute to a more thorough understanding of this area of education. And as a region, this information can provide a more specific picture of this particular student population and how we can better serve them in order to improve education in Appalachia.

Research Questions

1. What do students say about being in their Appalachian community college honors program?
2. What do students say are the benefits of participating in the honors program?
3. What do students say are the drawbacks/challenges of participating in the honors program?
4. What do students say about the honors program meeting/not meeting their intellectual, social, and professional needs?
5. What are the policy implications, if any, regarding honors programs at Appalachian community colleges?

Research Design

The participants in this study were students who had completed at least one semester in the honors program at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKCTC). Nineteen students were interviewed face-to-face. The participant population was selected to include at least one of each of the following:

- student currently in the program with intent to transfer
- student currently in the program in a technical program
- student who joined and participated in the program but did not finish the program
- alumnus of the program who transferred into another honors program
- alumnus of the program who did not transfer into another honors program

As issues arose after the interviews, follow up was conducted via email or face-to-face. The interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes and correlations. These were investigated for potential policy concerns.

Theoretical Framework

While Piland, Montgomery, and McKeague (1986) found that gifted students generally were pleased with their community college experiences without honors programs, they typically desired the experiences associated with honors programs. Rinn (2007) determined that gifted students who participate in college honors programs have higher personal aspirations, academic achievement (including completion rates), and academic self-concepts than do qualified gifted students who *do not* participate in honors programs. Wayne, Fortner, Kitzes, Timm, and Kalishman (2013) found evidence, after controlling for prior academic performance, that when students positively perceive their learning environment, their positivity contributes to better academic performance. Therefore, since gifted students succeed more often when they *are in* honors programs than when they *are not in* honors programs, and their perception of their learning environment can contribute to their academic performance, it is important to assess gifted students perceptions about their experience in honors programs and what aspects of the program they find most beneficial or important. If their perception of their program experience is negative, they could be negating the benefits of honors program participation in the first place. If their perception is positive, this positivity could provide two beneficial forces encouraging academic success.

Limitations

One limitation of this study design is that this Appalachian community college and the students in this honors program may be more dissimilar than similar to other community colleges--even those in Appalachia--and may impede policy conclusions applying to dissimilar schools. Also, this qualitative study conclusions may miss out on themes that would emerge from a broader study of more participation.

Definition of Terms

Gifted students. To discuss gifted students, a definition is necessary. Gagne's (2000) definition of giftedness focuses on "possession and use of untrained and spontaneously expressed superior natural abilities (called aptitudes or gifts), in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places an individual at least among the top 10% of his or her age peers" (p. 2). Rogers (2007) notes that the research agrees that these gifted individuals have a core of common characteristics, and different needs in the classroom, which then requires an altered curriculum and classroom culture. Researchers often consider students testing in the 98th - 99th percentile as gifted (Lawrence, 2009). Because honors programs generally base admittance on GPA and/or test scores, some students who have been academically successful would qualify for the program but not be *gifted* by the above definitions. Not all students who have a 3.5+ GPA would be in the 98th percentile. Also, not all students who *are* gifted are academically successful and would therefore not qualify to be in the program. However, honors programs are a repository of academically successful students, many of whom are gifted, and therefore, they are a good place to study students who often fit the characteristics of *gifted*.

Honors programs. An honors program is a planned set of experiences through which the academic needs of talented students are better served than they can be within the regular classroom (Testa, 2010). The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) (2010) offers the following summary of honors education:

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education. Honors experiences include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy, provide opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution's culture and mission, and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. (para 2)

Appalachia. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) was established by Congress in 1965 as a regional economic development agency. The ARC defines *Appalachia* as a geopolitical term given to the regions contained within the Appalachian mountain chain stretching from southeast New York to northeast Mississippi, which is about 1,200 miles long and often divided into three subregions including northern, central, and southern Appalachia based on demographics, economics, and topography. The Appalachian region comprises 420 counties in 13 states and is home to more than 25 million people throughout 205,000 square miles that includes all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states including Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. The ARC consists of the governors from the 13 states in the Appalachian region

and a federal co-chair appointed by the president (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.).

Rural. The U.S. Census Bureau defines urbanized areas as having a population of 50,000 or more, and urban clusters as having a population between 2,500 and 50,000. *Rural* is by default anything not considered *urban* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Conclusion

The U.S. government's commitment to gifted students has fluctuated greatly over time, often leaving these students underserved. Honors programs are a way to better serve these students, and since student perceptions of their educational experience influences their success, it is important to assess how they perceive their experience when they are in honors programs. This qualitative dissertation inquiry focuses on one honors program at an Appalachian community college to add to the knowledge of policy implications that could benefit this particular program and/or other honors programs at Appalachian community colleges. By discovering what these student participants believe about their honors program points to best practices, need for further research, and validation of/deviation from the literature base. As student perceptions of honors programs at Appalachian community colleges has not received attention in the literature, this study can help fill in that gap.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will include a literature review regarding the needs of gifted students, gifted students as an underserved population, gifted student honors programs and how they can provide for specific educational needs, the characteristics of an honors program, challenges community colleges face, and the additional challenges institutions face in rural Appalachia.

Identifying Gifted Students

It can be difficult to identify gifted students for multiple reasons. For example, teachers often are not trained *how* to identify these students (Lawrence, 2009). Lacey (2016) discusses Johns Hopkins University research regarding how the number of gifted students can be underestimated by 20%. Gallagher (1998) discusses the *ceiling effect* where gifted students will score at the top level of standardized tests often *before* instruction even begins. These tests measure low-level associations, and since gifted students are adept at more complex thinking than these instruments measure, their ability is not accurately demonstrated by test scores. Another difficulty in identifying gifted students is considering *what kind of giftedness* is being examined, creative/artistic, intellectual, athletic, or academic giftedness, and how that changes the method of identification. Also, statistically, there is disproportionate percentage of white female students in honors programs (Byrne, 1998). Overall, gifted students with disabilities are under-identified (Karnes, Shaunessy & Bisland, 2004) and because of stress and

“heightened sensitivity and emotional intensity” gifted students can even be misdiagnosed with disorders such as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) *instead of* being identified as gifted (Lawrence, 2009, p. 469). Also under-identified are gifted students of color (Moore, Ford & Milner, 2005), those who are English language learners (DeNisco, 2016), those who are rural (Lawrence, 2009), and those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Grantham, Frasier, Roberts & Bridges, 2005). Additionally, students who are rural, come from *broken families*, or suffer from poverty face biases, and may not be appropriately identified as gifted (Lawrence, 2009). This can even be seen as a modern civil rights problem (Gallagher, 1995), and educational inequity as a whole is a danger to American democracy (Braid, 2009). As can be seen, there is evidence of unfairness in serving eligible students. Ramos (2010) emphasizes that “a global perspective and increased sensitivity to cultural nuances must be developed” to mitigate underrepresentation (p. 153).

Needs of Gifted Students

In a summary of the research on gifted education spanning from 1861 to 2007, Rogers (2007) states that there is no single practice or program design that will work for all schools and all learners; however, the research points to some common characteristics of these students. NCHC (n.d.) offers this profile for the honors student:

Honors students tend to be highly motivated and high achievers. They respond with intensity to ideas, classroom discussions, and problem-solving. They can be highly creative and innovative. They are frequently willing to take on difficult and

in-depth projects. They are often involved in the campus community to a greater extent than other students. (para. 4)

When studying gifted students who were *underachieving* academically, Emerick (1992) found one factor that helped improve these students performance was moving them to more challenging and interesting classes. Students in effect were bored which led to performing under their ability. To ensure how curriculum can be differentiated for these students, Van Tassel-Baska (2013) includes the following criteria:

The use of acceleration and advanced materials, the use of complexity to focus on multiple higher level skills, concepts, and resources simultaneously, the use of depth to focus gifted learning in the form of projects and research, and the use of creativity to provide the skills and habit of mind that support innovation. (p. 72)

U.S. Department of Education (1993) notes the Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 defined these students as:

Children and youth with outstanding talent [who] perform or show the potential of performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools. (p. 26)

Guerrero and Riggs (1996) found self-discipline, motivation, and independence help cultivate scholarly characteristics in students, and gifted education should foster these experiences to help students grow into scholars. This dissertation study looks at the

intellectual needs of pace, self-direction of topics, and meaningful connections; the *social needs* of peers and faculty/student interactions; and the *professional needs* of extracurricular activities and transfer to senior institutions.

Intellectual needs. Several of the intellectual needs of gifted students include an accelerated pace, self-direction of topics, and meaningful connections to the course material.

Pace. Gifted students learn at a different rate from other groups (McKeague, 1984). They learn more efficiently and effectively than other students, propelled by advanced memory skills (Alloway & Elsworth, 2012). Research has continued to show the efficacy of fast-paced curriculum and instruction for these students (Van Tassel-Baska, 2013). These students typically do not have to work hard to achieve in the standard classroom, and they finish work faster than other students, though sometimes they underachieve for various reasons (Hansen & Toso, 2007).

Self-direction of topics. Gifted students desire flexibility in their coursework, and student-initiated learning is often the expected structure in honors education (McKeague, 1984). Trna (2014) notes inquiry-based education is helpful with these students because they have many questions, are curious, and have unusual ideas. Trna's study asked gifted students what classroom activities they most enjoy in science classes. 100% liked experimentation, 93% liked observation, 87% liked analyzing phenomena, and 80% liked solving projects, as opposed to data processing or evaluation. This shows the students surveyed preferred active, inquiry-based activities. Seely (2004) shows students who have greater control over their own learning are more responsible for their education and

are more motivated in their learning. In a study of underachieving gifted students, Baum, Renzulli, and Hebert (1995) found that when students were allowed self-directed projects, the majority improved in academic performance. When choice is given, students themselves are co-creators in the quality of their learning experiences (NCHC, n.d.). So, not surprisingly, gifted students prefer educators who offer autonomy and options in the classroom (Shaunessay & McHatton, 2008).

Meaningful connections. Gifted students often prefer complexity and they crave in-depth learning (McKeague, 1984). Trna (2014) shows they ask more questions, bring in new ideas and solutions, make meaningful links between things that are seemingly unconnected, and they are interested in how things work. The drive "to question and explore on a heightened level is atypical of the majority of the student body" but characteristic of gifted students (Pehlke, 2003, p. 28). Additionally, when gifted students are offered options, they often select assignments based on what would be personally meaningful to them (Thompson & McDonald, 2007).

For these reasons, interdisciplinary curriculum is a hallmark for gifted education. NCHC (2013) offers one of the characteristics of honors education as producing "creative integrations of evidence from several disciplines with an aggressive emphasis on interdisciplinarity" (para 2). An interdisciplinary curriculum is recommended by many researchers (McKeague, 1984; Van Tassel-Baska, 2013). Braid and Long (2000) wrote a monograph for NCHC on City-as-Text pedagogy, an example of experiential, interdisciplinary learning. They address concerns about interdisciplinary curriculum by saying "This is not the antithesis of specialized areas of study; it only underscores the fact that human experience in any context is multidimensional" (p. 11). One student in an

evaluation of an NCHC honors semester in Washington D.C. that utilized City-as-Text format reflected that:

I became aware of a strong connection between what I was learning and the real world, through the semester's use of field trips, immersion housing, class meetings in various places in the city/region, internships, guest speakers, and research projects which tapped into resources available at the locale... These changes in awareness were important to me as a preparation for finding my place and functioning in the world outside of the college campus. (p. 54)

Christopher (2003) found gifted students sought challenge and added depth and complexity in the curriculum. NCHC (2013) stresses that education for gifted students should encouraged various modes of inquiry, tolerance of ambiguity, local and global learning “with connections across time, genre, discipline,” and in-depth exploration of topics “without a prescribed result” (para. 5).

Rubenstein, Siegle, Reis, McCoach, and Burton (2012) points out that since many underachieving gifted students have the skills necessary to be successful, they often are choosing not to apply themselves to their work because the tasks and assignments are not meaningful to them. Expectancy-value theory of motivation explains that individuals' choices, persistence, and performance can be explained by their beliefs of how they will do on an activity and whether they value the activity and find it meaningful (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In fact, the more curriculum can emphasize meaning-making, the more it promotes autonomous learning, which then promotes curiosity and the motivation to learn more (Van Tassel-Baska, 2013). Common reasons gifted students drop out of

school is because they feel school is irrelevant and does not support their talent and interests (Hansen & Toso, 2007; Renzulli & Park, 2000).

Social needs. Some of the social needs of gifted students include being with gifted peers and having meaningful interactions with faculty.

Peers. There is a need to identify and group gifted students together with their peers (McKeague, 1984; Polzella, 1997; Rogers, 2007) because students consistently report “the most enjoyable aspect of participating in a college honors program is the collaborative work, personal support, and social bonding with their [gifted] peers” (Kane, 2001, p. 37). Gifted students often feel there is a hierarchy that separates them from other peers (Battle & Grant, 1995). Gross (1985) shows when gifted students interact with regular peers, they often have to choose between either satisfying their desire for academic achievement and sacrificing relationships with peers, or protecting those relationships at the expense of their academic performance. This can be intensified for female students who are taught to hide their intelligence because of social gender roles (Lawrence, 2009). Gifted students will sometimes deliberately underachieve to avoid feeling isolated and to gain social acceptance (Ford, 1995). This “desire to avoid academic excellence” is even more pronounced with minority students, whose community may link high academic performance with majority-culture values, disowning their own ethnicity and community, and “acting white” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1993, p. 13). When surrounded by gifted peers, these pressures can be lessened or alleviated.

Also, gifted students’ interests often differ from those of their peers (Hansen & Toso, 2007; Trna, 2014). The frequency and type of interaction between students and

their peers is important for cognitive outcomes, and more strongly for non-cognitive development such as in attitudes (Shushok, 2002) and when there are such differences between students, these meaningful connections can be difficult.

Gifted students who experience feeling isolated around peers can find a social and intellectual network with gifted peers through honors programs (Hebert & McBee, 2007). Stanlick (2006) states community is developed when members “share common purposes and perform actions consistent with those purposes [and] develop a feeling of common identity and membership” (p. 78), and building a community of students is a main goal of honors programs. Braid and Long (2000) notes the role of the learning community and peer relationships in collaboration. Students “come to realize that the education experience is not essentially a competitive process in which there are winners and losers. Rather it becomes a community of support in which discoveries are shared and ideas are mutually explored and critiqued” (p. 12). A student who attended an NCHC honors semester in New York City commented that “The discussions were different from previous ones I had...[Other students] encouraged me to understand how I thought differently...And so I began to develop a better picture of myself” (Braid & Long, 2000, p. 55). A student who attended an NCHC honors semester in Mexico stated “many of the most fulfilling lessons are learned from participating in a group dynamic with individuals I never would have chosen to...in my pre-set program” (Braid & Long, 2000, p. 59). Their time spent with their gifted peers is important for affective development (Van Tassel-Baska, 2013). When stepping into a class of gifted peers for the first time, students’ academic self-concept often dips, but adjusts, and being with gifted peers is a positive influence overall (Moon, Feldhusen, & Dillon, 1994).

Faculty / student interaction. Across the board, students benefit from small class size (Horning, 2007) and so honors students benefit as well. One of the features Christopher (2003) found that brought gifted students to honors programs was smaller class size. As an example, Miami Dade's honor college students have a student to faculty ratio of 15:1 compared to 25:1 for standard classes (Padgett, 2005). One benefit of gifted students attending community colleges is, in general, community colleges will have smaller class sizes than universities (Davies & Casey, 1999; Yang, 2006). The classes may be even smaller within the honors programs.

Hansen and Toso (2007) found underachieving gifted students who drop out cite lack of help, lack of respect, and lack of accommodation from teachers and staff as contributing factors in the decision to quit school. The frequency and type of interaction between faculty and students impacts both cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (Shushok, 2002) and informal interaction with faculty is linked to positive growth in intellectual development, autonomy, independence, interpersonal skills, educational aspirations, attainment, and general maturity (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Faculty mentoring can help gifted students with psychosocial development (Hebert & McBee, 2007). In discussing an NCHC Washington D.C. honors semester, a student reflected on faculty/student interaction and said "Teachers were around for more than just their time in class. Cooking and buying food together...helped with the community bonding" (Braid & Long, 2000, p. 54). Studies show when students are more engaged with faculty, learning increases, as does goal-achievement (Ross & Roman, 2009). Interaction outside of class provides potential for better in-class experience (Roberts & Salmon, 2008), and being able to build a relationship outside of class with faculty can help underachieving

gifted student improve their performance (Baum, Renzulli, & Hebert, 1995; McCluskey, Baker, & McCluskey, 2005; Zabloski & Milacci, 2012).

Professional needs. The professional needs of gifted students include appropriate extracurricular activities and training, and (for those at community colleges), transfer to complete higher degrees.

Extracurricular activities. Gifted students need extracurricular activities and chances to partake in meaningful activities such as community service. Renzulli and Park (2000) notes this may help prevent gifted students from dropping out. As an example of this type of experience, NCHC offers interdisciplinary week-long events in partnership with the National Parks Service called Partners in the Parks, where honors students camp and learn in the National Parks, focusing on experiential learning, service learning, and interdisciplinary studies of relevant topics (NCHC, 2015). Berger (2007) notes that as students move through honors program curricula and experiences, they are being moved from a community of *student discourse* to a community of *professional discourse*, and this is necessary for professional success. Benefits of students attending national and regional conferences include interacting with students and researchers from around the world, being able to present their own research, networking, and gathering information on scholarships and grad schools (Mitchell, 2002). Guerrero and Riggs (1996) found self-discipline, motivation, and independence help cultivate scholarly characteristics in students, and gifted education should foster those characteristics to help evolve them into professionals.

Fit into transfer. There are many reasons why students would start at community colleges before transferring, and those can include tuition costs, shorter commute, and the benefits of living at home (Gose, 2017). Hlinka, Mobelini, and Giltner (2015) conducted a case study of an Appalachian community college and found that many high school seniors lacked the confidence to go straight to a four-year university. Instead, they chose the community college as a stepping stone before transfer. Because of a weaker economy and rising tuition costs, students are more likely than at any other point in history to begin postsecondary education at community colleges, recently at 44% of the student population (College Board, 2011). At some universities, up to 60% of their new students can be transfers (Gose, 2017). Some students are even doing a *reverse transfer* where they come to community college *after* attending a 4-year institution for various reasons (Yang, 2006). Surveys show between 50% - 80% of incoming community college students plan to transfer for a bachelor's degree (College Board, 2011) and up to 75% - 90% of community college transfer students who move into highly selective four-year institutions complete their degrees (Dowd et al, 2006). And of course, gifted students are included in those numbers. Like all students, they need helpful counseling and guidance regarding college enrollment, transfer to other institutions, and career planning (Dowd et al, 2006).

Lucas, Hull, and Brantley (1995) found that honors students are more likely to transfer to major universities, private colleges, and international universities than the general student population. To aid honors students' transfer to receiving institutions, some community colleges like Miami Dade have articulation agreements with receiving schools that can guarantee their honors program graduates acceptance right into junior-

level courses upon transfer (Padgett, 2005). For example, Chattanooga State Community College has arrangements so their students can graduate with a bachelor's degree from a private school and it also provides special tutors and coaches so students can transition effectively as juniors, increasing probability of success (Chattanooga State, 2012). And honors programs that can attract underrepresented groups to the community college help fulfill the social contract of the community college by making transfer more effective and efficient for these students (Treat & Barnard, 2012). A strong argument for community colleges existing at all is preparing bright students for transfer to 4-year institutions (Byrne, 1998).

In a guidebook to help two-year colleges establish honors programs, the NCHC, American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, and National Council of Instructional Administrations state that because community college students usually do not have excess time and money, it is important to use methods like honors contracts, internships, and scholarship assistance, as well as offer flexible hours to include night and weekend classes, and focus on transferability of credits to best serve honors program students (Bentley-Baker, 1983).

Underserved Population

Luhman & Fundis (1989) showed that in 1972, the U.S. Commissioner of Education reported to Congress that most principals believed their schools did not have any gifted students. Later studies show that many rural teachers believed gifted students did not need special programs. Even when teachers feel a student is gifted, students are often not tested to assess giftedness, and teacher attitudes toward gifted students have been shown to vary according to years of teaching experience (Krijan & Boric, 2014).

These views show how it is possible that gifted students can be underserved in their education.

In a U.S. Department of Education 1993 report, the education of these students is referred to as a *quiet crisis*, and the report notes that most regular classrooms make few, if any, adjustments for gifted students. It continues to report only 2 cents of every \$100 spent in 1990 on K-12 education supported special opportunities for gifted students. Baker and McIntire (2003) evaluated state school finance policies for gifted education in 2000. In that study, only Florida was found to provide equitable and sufficient support for gifted education. Virginia, while less adequate than Florida, was determined to be a model of equitable distribution. Goral (2016) shows the vast disparity of how much money colleges and universities have to spend on each student. Princeton has \$2.2 million per student from their endowment, while the University of the Cumberlands in Williamsburg, KY, has \$1,500 per student. The SKCTC honors program that is being studied in this research has a budget for the 2016-2017 academic year of \$4,250, for the entire program for the entire year. The seminar classes are co-taught by three faculty members. This shows an investment by the humanities division of faculty resources, since those three faculty are teaching *one* course instead of *three* with that allotted time. Even after considering the investment of three classes' worth of faculty resources for each of the honors seminars, it still demonstrates funding difficulties. NCHC annual institutional membership alone is \$500, meaning nearly 12% of the annual budget is gone before the academic year even begins, and that does not include necessary institutional memberships to other organizations like Southern Regional Honors Council or the Kentucky Honors Roundtable. As Badenhausen (2012) shows, there is need for

accommodation for things such as NCHC dues by a tiered system or other solution. The University Arkansas Honors College has a \$100 million endowment from the Walton family. Institutions such as those are in a position to easily afford a \$500 annual membership fee while other institutions, such as SKCTC, are not in such a position.

When gifted students are underserved during their education, it can lead to underachievement in relation to their potential (Seely, 2004). Research shows up to 20% of all dropouts are gifted (Matthews, 2006). Since these students are capable of progressing successfully through the curriculum but are not, it appears the needs of these students aren't being met, which leads to low involvement and low success (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008; McKeague, 1984).

Some students underachieve because they are not appropriately identified as gifted, especially students from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, and they are then unable to access services (Elhoweris, 2008). Other reasons for underachievement include gifted students not liking school (Renzulli & Park, 2000), non-challenging academic work, poor relationship with faculty, an unsupportive climate (Seely, 2004), and not wanted to be ostracized by peers (Gross, 1985). And often, there is a misperception that these students do not need special services, which prevents institutional changes (Eckes, n.d.). How they are treated in school regarding their giftedness can even lead to a variety of feelings, including rage (Cross, 2001).

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2008) shows a history of the U.S. Federal Government working to correct the lack of gifted education through legislation, starting in 1971 when the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare issued the *Education of the Gifted and Talented: Report to the Congress of the*

United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education, which addressed low social economic status (SES) impact on gifted students. As discussed earlier, in 1988, Congress passed the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act to identify and better serve students from low SES families as well as culturally and linguistically diverse students. The 1993 federal report *Nationals Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* called on schools to better serve this particular population. When The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act became law in 2002, the Javits program was included in NCLB. It was expanded to offer grants serving students who are traditionally underrepresented in gifted programs. But Brown, Avery, Van Tassel-Baska, Worley, and Stambaugh (2006) shows that local administration of honors programs is increasingly unclear and idiosyncratic. It can be seen then why education advocates call for a national mandate for the education of gifted students to help better provide needed services (Eckes, n.d.).

Honors Programs

The NCHC (2010) offers the characteristics of a fully-developed honors program. Some of the main qualities are as follows: offers carefully designed educational experiences that meet the needs and abilities of the students and uses advising as well as special courses, seminars, colloquia, experiential learning opportunities, and options to do so; offers a clear set of criteria for admission, retention and completion; and offers active learning by presenting opportunities for students to participate in conferences, international programs, community service, internships, research, and other types of experiential education. Outcalt (1999a) lists the goals for honors programs at community colleges as retaining faculty and more academically-motivated students, offering

challenging and enriching courses, increasing transfer rates, and increasing student learning. It's also important for institutions to remember that honors programs can support the transfer mission of community colleges (Outcalt, 1999b).

Honors programs must have requirements and guidelines for acceptance of students. A 3.25 – 3.5 GPA cutoff is most common (Bentley-Baker, 1983). Chattanooga State Community College requires a 3.6 GPA or 27 on the ACT (Chattanooga State, 2012). SKCTC requires a 3.25 GPA or 23 on the ACT. These kinds of requirements are common. Outcalt (1999a) found that honors programs at community colleges used standardized test scores, college and/or high school grades, and other criteria as entrance requirements. Entrance essays, portfolios, interviews, or auditions are common (Bentley-Baker, 1983).

Outcalt (1999a) shows the programs can be arranged in various ways, with many institutions offering their students different pathways through the program, including independent research (53%); sections of honors courses, featuring different readings, coursework or requirements than the non-honors sections of the course (84%); special courses (68%); and converting a standard course to an honors course by changing requirements for the honors student (53% of the institutions reviewed by Byrne).

Rinn (2007) found, when comparing the academic achievement, aspirations, and self-concepts of gifted college students enrolled in an honors program and those gifted students *not* enrolled in an honors program, the results showed students in the programs exhibit both higher academic achievement and higher academic self-concept than those not in the programs. Shushok (2002) also found statistically significant differences between gifted student in honors programs and gifted students *not* in honors programs.

Those in the program achieved higher GPA and had higher retention rates into sophomore year. And they fared better than the general student population as well. Trucker (2014) found at Community College of Baltimore County, graduation/transfer completion rates were much higher for students in the honors program (84%) than the general student population (43%). However, Cosgrove (2004) shows that the benefits, such as shortest time to degree completion and graduation rates, apply only to students who complete the honors programs, and not those who begin the program and fail to finish.

Honors programs are a way to provide “educational challenges to an often overlooked student population – the educationally well-prepared” (Outcalt, 2009b, p. 59). The fundamental components in an honors program include academically challenging and interdisciplinary curriculum, a supportive environment, flexibility, small classes, career and educational counseling, and building social, academic, and leadership skills.

Community Colleges

In *National Profile of Community Colleges: Trends and Statistics*, Phillippe and Sullivan (2005) gives a history of community colleges in the United States. The first was founded in 1901. By 1950, there were 330. By the year 2000, there were 1,155 community colleges in the country. Through the years 1965-2001 enrollment in community colleges increased 432.9%, while at the same time, enrollment in 4-year colleges rose only 169.0%. Knapp, Kelly-Reid, and Ginder (2012) reports that for the 2012-2013 school year, 45% of all undergraduate students (7.7 million students) were enrolled in two-year schools. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) states of the 17.5 million students, 6.4 million of them (37%) were enrolled in two-year schools

as of April, 2015. Since nearly half of all undergraduate students attend community colleges and that percentage is increasing (Dowd et al, 2006), many students who attend community colleges would classify as gifted students. Dowd et al (2006) shows 26,000 students from the class of 1992 who started at community college had been in the top fifth of their high school classes.

With such a large population entering postsecondary education each year through community colleges, it is important to see how these institutions are providing for the needs of gifted students. Placing gifted students in special classes not only better serves the students by allowing for an accelerated pace and time for more analysis and exploration of the topics (McKeague, 1984), but it offers many other benefits as well.

Community colleges have long focused on providing special services to various students including non-traditional, international, and developmental students (Bentley-Baker, 1983). Over the next 10 years, it is projected that there will be an increase in older students, those lacking English language skills, and those already in the workforce who are diversifying or upgrading job skills. In the 2003-2004 academic year, 35.4% of community college students had dependents (17.2% of which were single parents), while only 14.3% of 4-year institution students had dependents (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). All of these students have different challenges and needs their institutions have to accommodate. Community colleges also have the responsibility to meet the needs of gifted students. Outcalt (1999a) notes that, according to the 1995 *Peterson's Guide to Two-Year Colleges*, approximately 25% of community colleges offered honors programs, and more recent data collected by the Center for the Study of Community College's Curriculum Research Project found that approximately 36% of community colleges

nationwide offer honors programs. Padgett (2005) shows more than a third of the 1,157 community colleges in the U.S. have an honors program.

Because of the wide variety of students community colleges serve, gifted students are often unchallenged as instructors must focus time and effort on students who are struggling to keep up with course content (McKeague, 1984). Nationally, more than half of students entering community colleges need remedial classes to bring them to college-level courses (Torres & Vitterito, 2008). Basic adult education and remedial developmental education is a mission and priority in the community college and therefore absorbs much of the available funding and workforce, just as in K-12 education. Community colleges also serve adult re-entry students, who have specific barriers such as fulfilling multiple roles and feeling out of place in the educational environment (Genco, 2007).

Honors Programs at Community Colleges

Some challenges facing honors programs at community colleges are lack of resources (money and faculty), and the pressure to meet the needs of honors students who are bound for transfer as well as those bound for work directly after graduation. Programs need to develop a curriculum that connects to multiple disciplines as well as occupational programs (Bentley-Baker, 1983). Also, there are issues of many community colleges being commuter schools and having non-traditional students (Bentley-Baker, 1983) as well as students being diverse in age (Davies & Casey, 1999). Additionally, Chang (2002) shows that compared to students at four-year campuses, community college students participate less often with school organizations and events, upwards of 80%

almost never attending extracurricular events. This can be mitigated by customizing events to fit the schedules and needs of older students and part-time students.

Because of the nature of these institutions, it “bordered on heretical” to consider honors programs at community colleges (Kane, 2001, p. 25). These programs can still face accusations of elitism (Colangelo, Assouline, & New, 2001), when in fact honors programs help bring community colleges back to their core mission of educational opportunity for all (Cohen, 1985). Pehlke (2003) makes the distinction that elitism and selectivity are not the same, though they can “become intimately intertwined when it comes to issues of equity and diversity” (p. 29). Part of the social contract of community colleges is serving all who come in the door, and to uphold that, these institutions have a responsibility to serve the academically talented. Since studies indicate these students are just as likely to drop out as other students (McKeague, 1984), there is good reason to target activities and programs to challenge and engage them and fulfill their special needs, as discussed earlier. Honors programs can help community colleges be more inclusive and comprehensive and meet the commitment to serve the needs of all students (McKeague, 1984). There is sound rationale for honors education, certainly as much as a rationale exists to “meet the needs of remedial education students at the other end of the broad community college spectrum” (White, 1975, p. 7). The benefits to community colleges that have honors programs are many, including greater learning potential, and high retention and transfer rates for honors students (Ross & Roman, 2009).

Additional Challenges for Appalachia

Every state and rural community has gifted students and this needs to be of concern to educators and legislators to properly serve this population (Colangelo, Assouline, & New, 2001). Being in Appalachia adds another layer of factors to consider when encouraging honors programs at community colleges. Many social issues affect students in Appalachia such as strong pull to stay with family (Hlinka, 2017; Wilson, Gore, Renfro, Black, Muncie & Treadway, 2016) and community drug use (Collins, Abadi, Johnson, Shamblen & Thompson, 2011). Three of the most impactful challenges are poverty, rurality, and first-generation status.

Poverty. Sometimes Appalachia is thought of as a “Third World country in the United States” (Goral, 2016, para. 14), and much of that impression comes from the realities and stereotypes of poverty. Salob (n.d.) notes for fiscal year 2009, 81 of the 420 Appalachian counties qualified for *distressed county* status due to income, poverty, and unemployment rates. The majority of these distressed counties are in central Appalachia, mainly Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia. A total of 94% of Appalachian counties fall below the top quartile in the U.S., and only 7 counties (less than 2%) had achieved the status of *attainment*, which includes the top 10% of counties in the nation. The ARC (2011) shows the poverty rate has been declining from 31% in 1960 to 16.6% over the 2008-2012 period, and high poverty counties (poverty rates more than 1.5 times national average) declined from 295 in 1960 to 107 over the 2008-2012 period, but incomes still lag. Pollard and Jacobsen (2015) shows mean household income 2009-2013 (in 2013 dollars) for the nation was \$73,487 while it was only \$59,006 for the Appalachian region, and 4.17 million people living in Appalachia are classified as in poverty in 2009-2013.

This distribution been seen how the ARC classified county economic status for fiscal year 2014-2015 (see Figure 1).

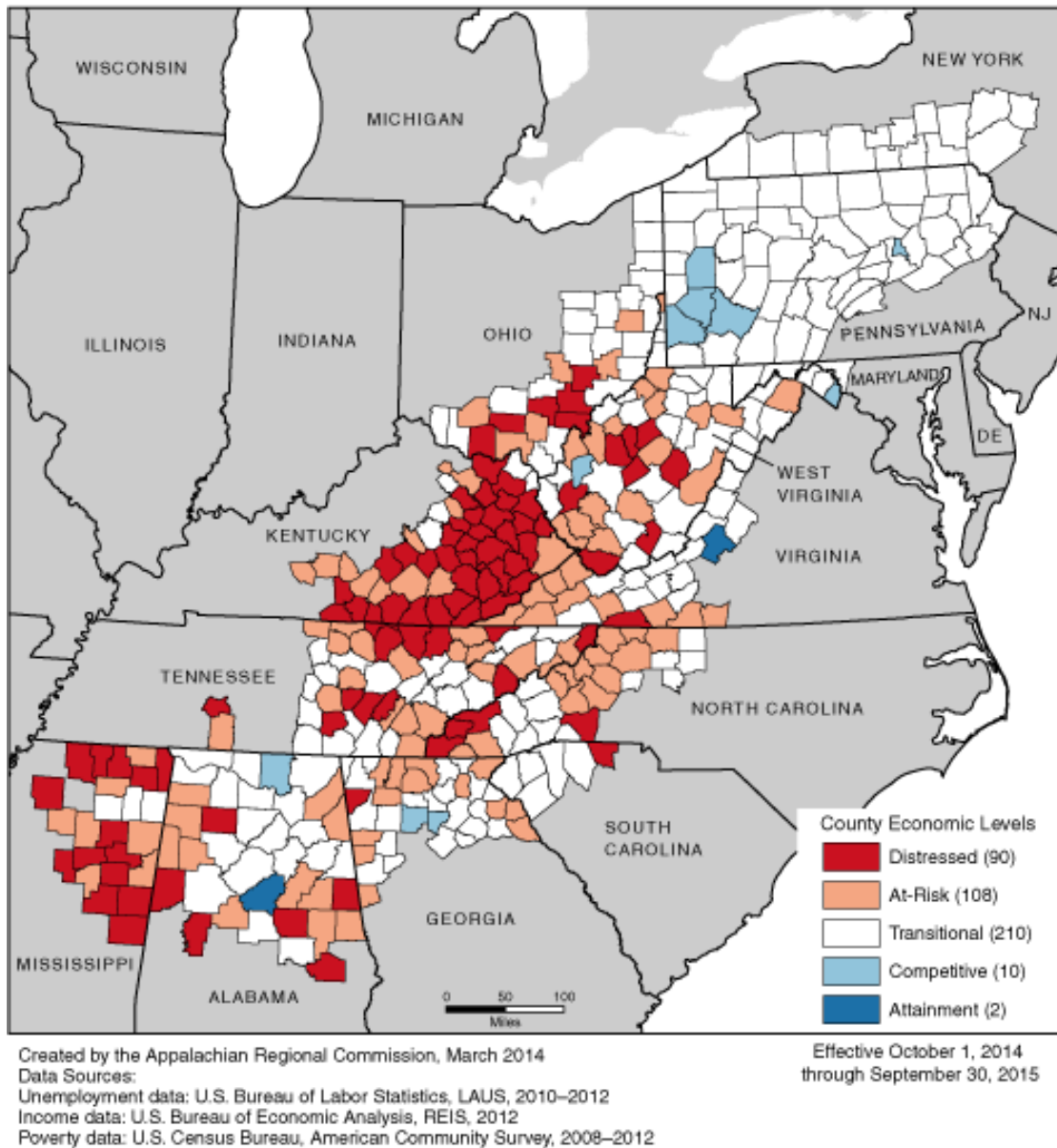


Figure 1: ARC Economic designation of counties, fiscal year 2014-2015.

Source: Appalachian Regional Commission (2014). *County Economic Status in Appalachia, FY 2014*. Retrieved November 7, 2015 from https://www.arc.gov/research/MapsofAppalachia.asp?MAP_ID=71

Poverty and low SES affect student success in school in multifaceted ways. These can include lower parental expectations, poorer general health and nutrition, and lower education level of family members, and gifted students in this population often require different approaches of identification, curriculum, and classroom structure (Seely, 2004). Also, since many Appalachian communities are suffering with a declining economy, the regional job market puts limitations on students' career aspirations unless they move away for their education and employment. That leaves many students in a tug-of-war between the pull of their career goals and the pull of their family and community (Hlinka, Mobelini & Giltner, 2015).

Rurality. Lawrence (2009) notes that rural cultures often suffer with fatalism, “fearful dependence on the past,” the self-image that rural people are ignorant, and the belief that, to be successful, students must leave the community (p. 464). Cities offer raw materials for educational experiences, such as museums, cultural centers, and performances (Kaplan & Van Tassel-Baska, 2010). These characteristics are often lacking in rural environments. While MacIntire and Plucker (1996) showed that rural students can sometimes attend more athletic and musical extracurricular activities than non-rural students, the quality and diversity of these activities can be lower than those in non-rural communities. Cities offer a critical mass of population which can make justification for honors programs and their implementation easier. One possible solution for honors programs in these rural locations would be differentiating the curriculum by using the internet (Johnson, 2008). This can be problematic though because rural locations often have poor digital infrastructure, even though the digital divide is shrinking in the U.S. overall (Rooksby, Weckert & Lucas, 2002). While the small size of rural

schools can aid in identifying gifted students because faculty can get to know students (and their talents), rural schools often have trouble attracting faculty with specializations (Lawrence, 2009).

The population growth and decline rates of Appalachia are complex. Pollard (2005) shows Southern Appalachia's population has grown rapidly over the previous three decades, and Northern Appalachia's growth has stagnated. Many counties throughout, and specifically in Central Appalachia, have seen steep population decline. Fifty-six counties have lost population for at least four of the five decades between 1950 and 2000. The ARC (n.d.) notes that 42% of the population in Appalachia lives in rural communities, while only 20% of the national population lives in rural communities. In Kentucky, where this study is being conducted, 59% of school districts are classified as rural (Coe, Howley & Hughes, 1989). Honors programs have a long history in rural community colleges. In a study of 225 community colleges in the North Central Association, Interestingly, White (1975) found that honors programs were more common at institutions that classified themselves as rural rather than urban or suburban. Hebert and McBee (2007) states:

Given that many gifted students in smaller institutions arrive at their universities from rural, isolated communities, the value of a well-run honors program increases. In such cases, a well-designed honors program will help "level the playing field" and prepare students who can compete against students from Ivy League institutions for highly selective graduate programs. (p. 148)

Programs for gifted students in rural schools face challenges of geographic barriers, sparse population, varied English dialects, and inadequate teacher training

(Belcastro, 2002). In a 1999 report *Gifted Education in Rural Schools: A National Assessment*, The Belin-Blank Center found there can be a lack of community resources (such as museums and libraries), limited curriculum due to low student population, and the need for remedial courses that requires teacher attention and institutional resources. One hurdle rural gifted students often encounter is facing the stereotype that they come from a “subordinate and less valued culture” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 468). Additionally, Davies, Hamilton, Salois, and Crow (2006) shows that rural students in Appalachia can have different needs than those in other rural parts of America. Indeed, Appalachia has a very distinct culture (Goral, 2016).

First-generation students. A striking number of college students in Appalachia are first-generation, meaning their parents had no postsecondary education. According to 2011 FAFSA application, Lilly and Todd (2015) compare first-generation rates for the U.S. (33.4%) to rates for West Virginia, the only entirely Appalachian state (49.3%). This is significant because as Brown, Copeland, Costello, Erkanli, and Worthman (2009) shows, when rural Appalachian students live in communities with higher proportions of adults who are college-educated, they are more likely to see completing a college degree as one of their life goals, but still, families remain the primary factor in actual educational attainment. Hodge and Mellin (2010) shows that when families are not familiar with college experiences, they can struggle to support their students, and this can cause students to feel frustration and annoyance at their own families and to feel jealousy of continuing-generation students and their family relationships. Being first-generation can also increase the pressure to succeed, as parents can push their students to achieve what they had not been able to, and cause students to form separate identities at school and at

home. Some studies (Hand & Payne, 2008) show if students have strong internal locus of motivation they can counteract other influencing factors, but the effects of being first-generation are significant.

Looking at percentage of the adult population who are college graduates in 1990 and 2000, Haaga (2004) demonstrates this (see Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage Adult Population U.S. College Graduates, 1990 and 2000

Table 1		
<i>Percent Adult Populations U.S. College Graduates, 1990 and 2000</i>		
<u>Location</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>
U.S. Total	20.3	24.4
Appalachia	14.3	17.7
Northern Region	14.4	17.7
Central Region	8.8	10.7
Southern Region	15.4	19.2
Distressed Counties	8.5	10.2
Transitional Counties	13.1	16.1
Competitive Counties	17.4	22
Attainment Counties	23.1	29.1
<p><i>Source:</i> Haaga, J. (2004). <i>Educational Attainment in Appalachia</i>. Retrieved March 21, 2015 from http://www.arc.gov/assets/research_reports/EducationalAttainmentinAppalachia.pdf</p>		

There is a stark difference in college and high school graduation rates in counties of the same state depending on if they are in the Appalachian region or not. Only the few *attainment* counties have a college graduation rate higher than the national average.

Haaga (2004) offers a breakdown of the rates by state, comparing the Appalachian and non-Appalachian counties (see Table 2).

Table 2. Educational Attainment of Population Aged 25 and Over, by State, 2000

Table 2				
<i>Educational Attainment of Population aged 25 and over, by State, for Appalachian and non-Appalachian Counties, 2000</i>				
	% Less than HS		% College graduates	
	Appalachia	Non-Appalachia	Appalachia	Non-Appalachia
Alabama	24.6	25.1	19.3	18.5
Georgia	23.3	20.7	21	25.5
Kentucky	37.5	21.3	10.5	19.8
Maryland	21.4	15.9	14.4	32.3
Mississippi	31.9	25.8	14	17.7
New York	16.9	21.2	20.8	27.8
North Carolina	24.2	21.3	19.1	23.3
Ohio	21.8	16.3	12.3	22.4
Pennsylvania	17.3	18.9	19.1	25.4
South Carolina	24.7	23.3	20.6	20.4
Tennessee	26.6	22.2	17.2	21.5
Virginia	30.2	17.3	14.8	31
West Virginia	24.8	N/A	14.8	N/A

Notes: "College graduates" includes those with post-baccalaureate degrees.
All counties in West Virginia are included in Appalachia.

Source: Haaga, J. (2004). Educational Attainment in Appalachia. Retrieved March 21, 2015 from http://www.arc.gov/assets/research_reports/EducationalAttainmentinAppalachia.pdf

In a statistical analysis report for the National Center for Education Statistics, Nunez, Cuccaro-Alamin, and Carroll (1998) compared the data for first-generation students to those whose parents had at least some postsecondary education. First-generation students

were more likely to have dependents, be older, be married, and have lower incomes. They were also more likely to enroll in public two-year institutions. While they were just as likely at two-year institutions to take remedial courses as other students, they had lower rates of attaining credentials. Even after controlling for SES, type of institution, and attendance, first-generation status had a negative effect on persistence and attaining credentials. One major effect of being first-generation is that students have a lack of preparation for college (Davies, Hamilton, Salois & Crow, 2006) and they are four times more likely to drop out (Lilly & Todd, 2015).

Since many students at Appalachian community colleges face a variety of these challenges, how the schools decide to allocate limited resources to serve their particular needs can have dramatic impact on their educational experience. Add to that the need of being gifted in these community colleges, and it is easy to see how students can be underserved.

Student Perceptions

Though student satisfaction surveys are an unreliable way to assess a program's quality when used in isolation, the combination of student satisfaction with other sources of information is beneficial for assessment (Driscoll, 2011). Regardless of accuracy, how students perceive the world impacts their conclusions and decisions (Greene, 2001). In a case study of why gifted students choose to participate in a college honors program or not, one factor influencing dropping out of the program was when students did not perceive the benefits to be worth the effort (Robbins, 2010). To assess the degree of the educational experience's success requires listening to the students and assessing *their perceptions* of the experience (Braid & Long, 2000).

Conclusion

Because the research shows 1. Gifted students learn differently, 2. They need different educational experiences, which honors programs can provide, 3. Community colleges have challenges to running honors programs, 4. Community colleges in Appalachia have additional challenges to running honors programs, and 5. Student perception affects performance and success, this study is needed to help assess the current situation for these students at these institutions so that efforts at honors education can be effective, efficient, and achieve the goal of serving the needs of gifted students through Appalachian community college honors programs.

Chapter 3

Research Design

Appropriateness of the Research Design

Phenomenological research design seeks to understand and interpret meaning of a particular human experience phenomenon. For this study, this researcher asked study participants questions such as “What is it like to experience the honors program in this community college in rural Appalachia?” The purpose of the study is to assess student perception of their life experiences with the SKCTC honors program and how their needs are met or unmet by the program as a source of evidence to better understand the nature of honors programs in a rural Appalachian community college. This qualitative design was chosen in order to understand *how and why* students at this institution believe their needs are being met or not met, and because the factors that influence student perception can be very individual and nuanced, an in-depth qualitative investigation was thought to be more illuminating than a quantitative investigation. Student participants provided rich descriptions about their experiences in an honors program in a rural Appalachian community college.

Research Design

In this qualitative study, interviews were conducted to assess the various ways students believe their intellectual, social, and professional needs are met or not met by their honors program. Students were asked to describe their experiences—both positives and benefits--in their time in the honors program, as well as the negatives and drawbacks

of their program. They compared their experiences with non-honors peers and honors peers, non-honors faculty and honors faculty, non-honors courses and honors courses. Additionally, they described extracurricular experiences through the honors program. They were asked to discuss their educational and professional goals and in what ways they learn best, as well as improvement suggestions for the honors program. Each interview was a 1 – 2 hour digitally recorded interview.

Once transcribed, each transcript was read through twice before reading and coding these data into themes. Once coded participant data descriptions were synthesized and complete, themes were read through for further analysis understanding. For example, I asked questions such as, “What meaning can be determined from these data?” “What are most participants saying repeatedly?” “How are the participants describing their experiences in their honors programs? What are any outliers?” “What are the surprise findings, if any?” etc. Once saturation of the data was met, understandings were determined.

Setting and Participants

This phenomenological study was conducted at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKCTC) honors program. SKCTC is one of 16 community colleges in the Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS). SKCTC serves Bell, Harlan, and Letcher counties in Kentucky, though some students commute from counties in Tennessee and Virginia. Upon request, SKCTC’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness provided information about the school and its service area. SKCTC was founded in 1960 and provides an Associate in Arts program, Associate in Science

program, and Associate in Applied Science programs, as well as various certificates and diplomas. Over the past few years, SKCTC has an overall declining enrollment (5,222 in 2013; 3,661 in 2014; 3,111 in 2015; and 3,139 in 2016). As of spring 2017, the SKCTC headcount was a total of 2,466, (with 1,602 as traditional, 432 as dual credit, 31 as workforce, 368 as learn-by-term, and 33 as learn-on-demand). During these same years, SKCTC also had a growing gap in student gender (female students were 44.7% of the student population in 2013; 52% in 2014; 54.3% in 2015; and 54.7% in 2016). During this time, increasing numbers of SKCTC students took online classes. The percentage of credits that were online was 17.4% in 2013; 21.3% in 2014; 23.6% in 2015; and 29.4% in 2016. Regarding age, for fall 2015, 61.3% of students were <25 years old; 17.2% were 25-34; and 19.8% were 35 and older.

A National Center for Education Statistics report, *IPEDS Data Feedback Report 2016*, shows demographic and credential attainment figures for fall 2015. Southeast's student population was 90% white and 54% female. The FTE (Full-Time Equivalent) for 2014-2015 enrollment was 1,949, with 1,660 full-time students, and 1,451 part-time students. The number of associate's degrees awarded that academic year was 447, and the number of certificates awarded was 587. For the 2014-2015 academic year, tuition and fees for full-time degree-seeking or certificate-seeking undergraduates was \$3,624. During that year, 93% of students received grant financial aid (80% from federal grants, 58% from state/local grants), and 29% of students took out federal loans for financial aid. The average amount of grants received were \$5,297 federal and \$1,744 state/local. The average federal loans taken out were \$5,009. Retention rate for the fall 2014 cohort was 60% for full-time students and 40% for part-time students. The 2012 cohort had a

graduation rate for full-time, first-time, degree-seeking or certificate-seeking undergraduates within 150% of the normal time to program completion of 30%, and the transfer-out rate was 2%. Out of that cohort, African American students and Hispanic/Latino students had higher completion rates than white students overall (33% for African Americans and 100% Hispanic/Latinos compared to only 30% of white students). For the fall 2015 semester, SKCTC employed 104 full-time teachers and staff, including 9 professors, 8 associate professors, 10 assistant professors, and 20 instructors.

The SKCTC honors program began in the fall semester of 2013 and has had 12 students finish the requirements at the time of the study, with 5 more set to graduate spring 2017. The program has had about 10-15 students each year during its first 4 years of operation. Admission into the program requires an entrance essay and 3.25 GPA or a composite 23 on the ACT. The requirements of the program consist of 5 honors classes (at least 2 being honors seminars and the other 3 being a combination of seminars and/or honors contract classes) and a capstone project, all while maintaining at least a 3.25 GPA.

The seminar classes are general education humanities classes, and any SKCTC student (including those not in the honors program) who has successfully completed ENG 101: Writing 1 can take the seminars. The seminars include HNR 101: Introduction to Contemporary Thought, HUM 204: Honors Appalachian Seminar, HUM 207: American Studies, and HON 202: Contemporary World. Since only one seminar is taught per semester, it takes a minimum of two semesters to complete the requirements. The seminar classes are co-taught by three humanities faculty members: one in Letcher County, one in Harlan County, and one in Bell County. The class meets over ITV (interactive television), where the various campuses connect through the TV system of

cameras and microphones. These faculty also serve as the honors program advisors, director of the program, and assistant director of the program. Two of the honors faculty are associate professors and one is assistant professor. The program budget for the 2016-2017 academic year was \$4,250.00.

The honors contract classes are a way for students to turn classes they take for their associates degrees into honors-level experiences. The student and faculty member of that class agree on a way to add or change 20% of the coursework for the honors student, and the contract is then approved by the honors program director. At the end of the course, the faculty member signs off that the student did or did not meet the expectations of the contract. If the student did, a note is made on the transcript stating that particular course was an honors course. The extra or different work can take a variety of forms, some examples being: a student in a physics contract honors class designed and led a lab experiment for the class, a student in a writing contract honors class made a gun safety video to supplement an essay written for class, or a student in a sociology contract honors class met for weekly discussions on additional readings assigned by the faculty member. As five honors classes are required, and two of them must be honors seminars (which only four are offered), each student will take 1-3 honors contract class.

The participants in this study were students who had actively participated at least one semester in the honors program, some of which were currently active in the program, some currently in the program but had been inactive for at least one semester, some who had completed the program, and some who participated in at least one semester but withdrew from the program. Invitations were sent to 26 past or current students, and 19

students were interviewed face-to-face. The student selection was set to include at least one of each:

- current student with intent to transfer (7 invited, 5 participated)
- current student in a technical program (1 invited, 1 participated)
- student who participated in the program but withdrew (5 invited, 3 participated)
- alumnus of the program who transferred and joined another honors program (1 invited, 1 participated)
- alumnus of the program who transferred but did not join another honors program (10 invited, 8 participated)

The invited participants were asked their age, gender, and racial identifiers. Categories for race and gender were not provided to select from so as not to limit how students could identify. All participants identified as male or female, and racial identifiers offered included white, biracial, Hispanic, and human. Participating students were assigned pseudonyms, and they were classified as being (C) current and active, (I) current but inactive, (F) finished, or (W) having withdrawn from the program (see Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Study Participant Information

Table 3				
<i>Participant Information</i>				
<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Status</u>
Annie	F	23	white	F
Becka	F	21	white	I
Ben	M	46	white	W
Danielle	F	26	white	F
Elizabeth	F	20	white	F
Emma	F	20	white	F
Estelle	F	24	Hispanic	F
Felix	M	26	white	C
Gina	F	28	white	C
Iona	F	20	white	F
Jillian	F	35	white	C
Kylie	F	19	white	W
Lydia	F	31	human	C
Marie	F	23	white	F
Natalie	F	23	white	W
Nora	F	24	biracial	F
Sophia	F	20	white	F
Vaughn	M	20	white	C
William	M	25	Hispanic	C

Table 4. Distribution of Participant Demographics

Table 4		
<i>Distribution of Participant Demographics</i>		
	<u>Participated</u>	<u>Invited</u>
Female	15	20
Male	4	6
White	15	22
Other	4	4
18-24	12	17
25-34	5	5
35+	2	4
Current	6	8
Inactive	1	2
Withdrawn	3	5
Finished	9	11

Procedure

An electronic invitation to participate was sent to 26 current and former students in the SKCTC honors program. From the 22 volunteer students, 19 participants were interviewed. Scheduling conflicts prevented interviewing the other 3 willing students. Participants were interviewed face-to-face. Interviews were individually scheduled, the study was explained and any questions were answered, participants signed informed consent forms, and audio was digitally recorded during the interview. Interviews were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed for emergent themes and correlations. When clarification was needed after the interview, questions were sent electronically to

participants. Some participants spontaneously messaged after their interviews with more information they wanted to contribute.

It was stressed to participants that the study not evaluating the program's effectiveness, but rather their *perceptions* of the positives and negatives of their experience in the program, how their needs were being met or not met, what they saw as areas for program improvement, and that the investigation was a way to look for potential policy concerns for this program, other programs, or future research.

Interview Questions

Participants were asked the following.

1. Describe your motivation and support for coming to college.
 - a. Make sure participant responds if first-generation status, what program going into/what degree seeking, family structure (spouse, kids), where they are from (Appalachia, rurality, etc.), and what their support network is like.
2. Describe your motivation for joining the honors program.
 - a. Make sure participant responds how they learned of it, what they expected from it, how they think it will help them in the future, what their career goals are, and if they have intent to transfer. For those that have already transferred: discuss why they did/did not join new honors program and what the transfer experience was like.
 - b. For those who withdrew from the program, make sure they discuss their decision not to continue participation.

3. What is it like to be a student in the honors program in this rural Appalachian community college?
4. What have been the benefits and positive experiences of being in the honors program?
5. What have been the drawbacks and negative experiences of being in the honors program?

Then, after they have discussed all their spontaneous topics, ask the following if they were not addressed:

6. Describe your academic *intellectual* needs and how the honors program does/does not meet them.
 - a. Make sure participant responds if the class material is appropriately challenging, if learning is different than in non-honors classes, if class topics are engaging, meaningful, and interesting, if assignments/projects are student-directed, if the program provides learning opportunities outside of the classroom, how they best like to learn.
7. Describe your academic *social* needs and how the honors program does/does not meet them.
 - a. Make sure participant responds if they interact differently with honors peers than with non-honors peers, if they like working with their honors peers, and how interactions with honors faculty are/are not different than with other non-honors faculty.
8. Describe your *professional* needs and how the honors program does/does not meet them.

- a. Make sure participant responds if they are learning professional skills through the honors program courses and extracurricular events, if materials and skills developed will help in future classes, institutions, and careers, if opportunities to attend conferences/training/professional development are provided, if honors advisors are helpful.

Conclusion

Community colleges need to provide honors education for gifted students to fulfill their mission of education access and excellence. Appalachian institutions have additional challenges beyond that of other community colleges to meet this goal. Therefore, it is essential to assess honor student experiences and use their experiences to improve honors programs. Studying student perception of their experiences in an honors program is a critical part of that assessment. By asking these 19 Appalachian community college honors students at SKCTC about their experiences, we can compare their responses to the literature in four broad sections of research: gifted students, honors programs, community colleges, and Appalachia. These students are experiencing education at a poorly-research intersection of these four bodies of research, and their perceptions of their experiences at this intersection can point to potential policy improvements.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

Before we can discuss what the participants said about their experience in the SKCTC honors program, it is important to get a sense of the things the research shows impacts students' educational experiences, such as being Appalachian, being first-generation college students, having support networks, and the other topics discussed in Chapter Two. These factors give context to what the participants say about their honors program experiences. For example, when the research shows sometimes gifted students feel they have to choose between academic achievement and maintaining relationships with non-gifted peers, the interviewed participants' impulse to buffer their comments about non-honors peers so as they do not sound arrogant or mean will be seen within an important context. When the research shows how rurality limits students' exposure to cultural events and activities, the interviewed participants' comments about opportunities to attend conferences with the honors program will be seen within an important context. Because of that, it is necessary to get a background understanding about the participants' lives and educational history before discussing how they perceive their honors program experience within these multifaceted contexts.

Also, to lessen the chance of potential bias in the presentation of the data, this chapter will contain more direct quotation than summary. To summarize a participant's comments about rurality or first-generation status was not potentially problematic, but to

summarize comments that expressed the participant's opinions about the honors program, its strengths and its weaknesses, could open the door to misrepresentation. Those passages were safest to present as the participant said them, without summarizing or interpretation. Also, participants' pseudonyms are almost always attached to their comments. This could aid in the reading of this chapter by following a particular participant's story throughout the sections. For example, if the reader is interested in the perspective of an older student who came to Appalachia as an adult and already had a career, they could follow Ben's story. If the reader is interested in the perspective of a single mother with a young child, they could follow Gina's story. If the reader is interested in the perspective of a student who had various forms of K-12 education and who has now transferred to a university honors program, they could follow Estelle's story. The demographic breakdown of the participants' age, race, and gender can be found in Table 3 in Chapter Three.

Appalachia / Rurality

One of the themes that were discussed by the participants to varying degrees was being in and from Appalachia, including rurality, family, drugs, poverty, educational quality and availability, job opportunities, and life goals. Many of the topics that participants discussed regarding Appalachia or being rural coincides with the literature surveyed in Chapter Two. Participants spoke of a strong connection to place and culture, and were quick to speak about the positives of the region as well as the negatives. Even those who wanted to leave southeastern Kentucky spoke positively about aspects of it,

and often the challenges of the region were a strong motivating factor in their lives and career goals.

Several of the participants have always lived in the region. Participant Annie has lived “pretty rural,” in the same house her whole life. Participant William described his rural upbringing as “Pretty out of the way, kind of in the sticks, and not close to anything noteworthy.”

The majority of the participants have lived primarily in this region of Appalachia, but did have some time away. Participants Sophia, Iona, and Lydia mentioned they moved away for a short period, but moved back, so they have lived in the region almost their whole lives. Participant Emma answered the question by first asking if I knew where “the bridge to nowhere is,” as a way to start explaining where she grew up. She moved away for a short time to transfer to a state university, but moved back for family medical reasons. Participant Jillian moved around quite a bit before returning, partly because of being in the military. About that experience, she said “I’ve lived in quite a few different places and I’ve travelled about all over the United States. I’ve been a little bit of everywhere. So I’ve seen both sides to everything. I think that helps.”

A couple participants were raised solely in the region and are currently living away from Southeast’s service area, but are still in Appalachia, such as Richmond, KY or Berea, KY attending colleges and universities. Participant Estelle lived in a rural community in Harlan County before moving to a city a few hours away to attend a state university after graduating from Southeast. She describes adjusting to life in her new community by saying

It was hideous. It was! Because I couldn't get used to the traffic. I had never driven the interstate ever...and I was scared the entire time and I got here and traffic was too much and I was confused about everything. There was just so much stuff, so many shops. Couldn't figure out what to do, couldn't figure out where the doctors' offices were, didn't know how to- I couldn't find anything! [laughter]. It was so bad. So it was like, in the small town, you have one hospital, and then you have like these five restaurants and then you have Walmart. But I come up here and there's just so much choice, there's so much traffic, there's so many people. It was hard.

In-migration. One participant, Nora, talked at length about living in a suburban neighborhood on the central coast of California and then the transition from homeschooling to public school in California, and then moving to public school in Kentucky when she was in middle school. She found many differences between her educational experiences:

[In California] there was other nearby, more metropolitan areas that you could go to and they were within a distance that was feasible. If you wanted to send your kids to school there, you could. But I still went to a relatively small school in my suburban area, and actually, I didn't go to school for a number of years. I started school late. I went in, I'm not sure how old I was when I went in, but it was like, I started in the 5th grade. And there were some things that I needed caught up in, especially in math areas. Within a year, somehow, with the quality of the school, the individuals that were teaching me, the extracurricular activities like math

clubs and things like that, I got caught up in basically five years of math and science in a year.... I know that when my brother started school, he was younger and he was having trouble learning to read and write, much younger than me. There's a five-year age difference, and we were at the same school, but we had a teacher who specialized in speech pathology, and linguistics and stuff. They're at an elementary school that would take kids on a one-on-one basis and work with them to learn to read and write. She also worked with ESL students in that school district and she stayed on top of things. I know that the math club I participated in, I went there early, I want to say it was two times a week in the morning and got help from two ladies who were volunteer workers there but had formerly been teachers. They were retired. And those are things that it would've been- it was kind of crazy to expect coming here. When we moved here, I was kind of shocked because...there was definitely more technology in the classroom. That is something that's different. But it wasn't utilized well. Like, we had ...smartboards and things like that [in Kentucky], where we just had literally chalkboards [in California] ...so, I don't know- it's like maybe the funds were used in different ways? Maybe instead of going towards helping and supporting the teachers to be more effective, it went towards technology....The quality of education that I got was immensely different.

In a post-interview email, Nora added that the curriculum was different between her California and Kentucky experience as well. She noted that when she was in 6th grade in California, after she got caught up, they were doing Algebra 1, and when she got to Kentucky, she was two years ahead of her new peers in math.

Participant Ben spoke about coming to the Appalachian region as an adult and his experience incorporating into the culture. Originally from Northwest Ohio, he came to southeast Kentucky after his military career because his wife was from the region. He describes his current residence as rural, “about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to a mile outside of town...so I can still raise my animals and shoot my guns, or whatever I want to do....It’s kind of nice and quiet. Nobody knows we’re there.” When describing the experience of moving here as an adult, he said

Well, a lot of people make fun of your accent for a while. And then you speak to people from where you were raised, and *they* think you have an accent now. So you fight the accent wherever you go. I guess I’ve really never thought about it. I guess...there’s a lot of people who, when they get old enough here, they just want to move and see the world because this is all they know. That’s no different than me when I was eighteen, nineteen years old, growing up in an Ohio farm community. My grandparents had a 175-acres of farm outside of town. But I grew up in town. But my town was like Middlesboro [Kentucky]-- it’s small, but you still are not that far to drive down into Toledo...or wherever you want to go....And it was rural but it didn’t feel as isolated as these mountains are. I should say, from an outsider coming in, you can get lost in these mountains in a heartbeat. Back up in Ohio, you just keep walking in a straight line, you’ll hit a 7/11 sooner or later [laughter].... I don’t think our culture was that much different. I mean, obviously, wording was maybe a little different. But you still had the families that had money. You still had the families that grew up without money-- they lived out on the farms. You still have it here. You’ve got people that

grew up in coal families, and that's all they have. But at the same time, when we moved here... it was like moving back to Mayberry. It was small. And a lot of people, like I said, living here, they all want to leave to see the world or get a better education at the larger university....They're looking for a better job, so they're moving to a larger metropolis area. But once you get yourself settled, and you have pretty much your nest-egg, or whatever you're going to do, I think a lot of people start thinking about...raising their children kind of the way they were raised....We all have our good and our bad, but small town values-- going to church, things like that...so I was attracted to it. The younger demographics all want to run, but when you get old enough, you always want to come back. It's like coming back to your mom and dad. So even though I was one state off, this is where my better half is from, and I was totally okay with it.

Another participant, Natalie, was not originally from the area, or from the United States. She came to a southeast Kentucky university on a sports, which "didn't work out very well" because the athletic program was "a little disorganized" and "didn't feel like it was a right fit" for her. She stayed here because her husband is from the area. About her experience with the Appalachian culture, she said

I loved the people I was surrounded with; I loved the culture- that was a big adaptation for me and I loved it....I was used to fast paced lifestyle and that was completely different when I moved here. I actually had to get used to slowing down and not being on the rush with everything....The scenery was a big thing to get used to. I wasn't used to looking at so much greenery every day. I would say the biggest con would be the pay grade I guess. I'm used to having jobs that paid

twenty bucks an hour for walking around concerts and handing out flyers, to coming here and only make \$7.25. That was a big adjustment. The language was even hard to get used to at some points. I had to ask people to repeat what they said sometimes because I either wasn't used to the slang or how they pronounce things. Like, intestines [short 'i' vowel sound] or intestines [long 'i' vowel sound]. So yeah, I'd say that was the biggest things to get used to. I think the biggest time when I noticed that was when I just got married this summer. The whole planning a wedding thing was very different among both of our cultures.

Job availability. One of the most common themes that arose while discussing Appalachia was feeling the need to move away for further education and/or to have access to more career opportunities. Participant Becka spoke about her strong connection to the region: "I love it here.... I love the mountains. I love the people. I mean, I want to see this place grow as much as anybody. I don't want it to die off." She continued to say the drug culture in her community pushes her to want to be successful in her career to help the region:

I do want to help people. I mean, especially around here, I think a drug abuse counselor would be a really good thing because there's a lot of people who are on drugs. There's actually some new place opened up in Cumberland. There's a new house opening up for ladies who are [using drugs] and they can go and get help. I think that's awesome. That's the biggest connection for me because I know I see everything in my hometown, what's going on just all over. You always see something or somebody breaking into somebody's house or some drug bust or something like that. I just want to help people, especially around here.

She then went on to say that even though she really wants to stay in the region, she might not be able to because of limited job opportunities:

Right now, of course, one of the biggest things why I'm considering what I'm doing, [is] I want to stay around here, but at the same time, it's kind of hard to stay around here because there's not many jobs, not hardly anything but nursing around here.... It's kind of hard being from here, wanting to stay here, but if you go get the degree, then what if you can't find a job?... But just about anything I've decided to do is going to move me away from here because of that fact. It's just such a small town.... There's really great people here. There's people who want to make a change. There's people who go to school. It's not their fault that they can't have a job around here. I mean, the economy and all that is just- I don't know. It's just crazy.

She ended by saying her "long term goal...is to open a place up myself where I can be employed and employ others to be able to help the people around here." Other participants echoed the pressure to move away for jobs even though they would prefer to stay in the region. Estelle, an education major, said

I am concerned that I'll probably have to move for a job...somewhere out in like Western Kentucky or I might even have to go out of the state eventually. I just don't know about- with all this stuff about charter schools and things happening, I don't know what that means for me. So, if I can stay in the state and if I can teach at a place like I grew up in, that would mean a lot to me. It might not mean as

much pay, but it would mean a lot to me. But if I have to leave, then I have to leave.

Participant Vaughn discussed a common compromise people make in rural Appalachia: making long commutes of over an hour one way for employment. He said

Well, [moving away] really depends on the jobs and what hospitals are still around here, because you know, the hospitals in our area, down here, are struggling. So at the point that I get out, I don't know if there will be hospitals for me to work at down here. But I know the drive to Knoxville [Tennessee] isn't that bad. And people work there and live here all the time and just drive back and forth.

Nora commented that people have pressured her to go into the medical field, to “be a physical therapist or a pharmacist” because those jobs are ones available in the region. She discussed how this action stalls diversification of the economy:

I could [go into the medical field] because I am who I am, [but] I didn't want to do that because it just wasn't really *me*.... It's a combination of a lack of jobs in our area, [and] people feeling like...it's one of the few economic industries that's still somewhat stable here. But also I feel like honestly that's...really based in ignorance because if you're going to have diversity in the economy and you want that to be available, then you really shouldn't push people in one direction, you know what I mean? So it is a little bit of concern because I know that even in my time here, the majority of peers that I have going to school with me, they feel like [STEM and medical is] where to go and you can't have that overwhelming supply

when there's only going to be so many jobs. We've only got two hospitals in the area... The other day I had to go and get a drug test and I went to a lab and the woman who was working there, I swear to you, she had to be at least in her 60's and she seemed like she had been doing that for a long time so it's, you know, it's pushing younger people into a position where they're going to try to get jobs and competing with people who have that level of experience in a small area, and it's not really a good idea.

Ben also spoke about selecting a career in the medical field because of job availability.

He said

Maybe joking or whatever- but I was looking around the area here and unless you were taking care of somebody that was about ready to pass away- other words, you were in the hospital field, and a nursing home, or you had the funeral home...and really it was just in a conversation with you people- I needed something that was always going to be recession-proof. People's health- and we all die. So, I really didn't know what I wanted to do, I just knew that I wasn't going to turn around and be moving from one state to another state, things like that, with my children...I'm a little older in my life, so I don't need a lot or whatever, what I do got is paid for. So just something I could have a job to make ends meet....Being a little older, I guess I'm a little more cautious with everything.

Out-migration. And some of the students spoke about wanting to leave the region for reasons other than just employment. Participant Gina, who wants to be a child psychologist, talked about some of the benefits of living in small, rural communities, but in the end, wants to leave:

I stayed there and grew up there but I always kind of hated it, not to say that- okay, there's some good things about living in a small town. The people that you meet and just knowing that somebody always has your back, and somebody is always close, and the crime is not bad, and you feel safe with your children playing outside- those things are really good. But there's no opportunities here, and I feel like if you really want to accomplish something big with your life, you have to go elsewhere, and that's sad because there are people here who could benefit from psychology. There are...hardly any children's psychologists in the area.... And it would probably be a really good thing to stay here but I just really don't want to be here. There's nothing here for me. And if my child grows up here, there would be nothing left for her. And then so on and so forth.... I don't want to be here. I actually hope to move this summer and start my schooling elsewhere. I would like to go back to Florida, but on more of the Gulf Coast. But yeah, I just want to be somewhere not here.

Like Gina, participant Felix spoke fondly of aspects of his small town community, and then talked about the internal and external pressure to leave. He said

You've got people who want you to succeed--they want you to get out of this small place. And it's not until you put that one foot in front of the other and they realize "Okay this kid wants to get out of here," they'll help you out.... You got to look at the drug culture that's here and the jobs that are here. You can make money here, but you know, and I hate to say it this way, but anybody can dig a hole. I can go dig a hole and dig some coal up... But not everybody wants to do that. But then again too, this is a great place for the medical field. You got lots of

cancers and COPDs and stuff like that. So there's room to make money here, but it's just like my grandma always said, "It's a good place to raise kids and it's a good place to retire. It's not a good place for money." And at the center of it all, a doctor becomes a doctor because he wants the money, to live more comfortably. ...But all in all, it comes down to you can't work at Walmart forever and ever and expect to live comfortably. Not anymore.

When asked if, once he is a medical doctor, he wants to remain in the region or leave, he quickly responded with "I'm out. I'm gone." When asked to explain, he continued

Well, my papaw is about to die. My granny is dead. Everybody else is on dope. So I can stay here and let that keep just dragging on, and having to deal with that crap, which I don't really deal with it-- I don't talk to those people. But then you go to the store and they're like, "Hey did you hear what happened to your mom?" And that just brings up stress that you can't help stressing about you know? And the stress will still be there, but it can be there 900 miles away. Plus, Montana is just beautiful. Here is beautiful too, but I've seen it. The mountains only strike you every now and then, if that makes sense.

Like others, Lydia mentioned jobs and said "I would honestly like to live somewhere else." She continued to say "I don't think I would like to go too far but...somewhere where there are...more opportunities to do things--better opportunities where I could raise a family, you know, things for my children to do."

Other obstacles. Another theme participants mentioned was how the topography of living in the mountains adds challenges to education. Participant Kylie noted how

being spread out over three counties made it difficult to do group work in the honors seminar classes: “When we did get into the group projects, not being able to meet in person [since] we were each at a different campus and not having a specific time we could all be together” was a complication to completing the group project. Participant Annie transferred to UVA Wise after Southeast, but the commute was the main contributing factor to her switching to a college with an online program:

It was about a 30-40 minute drive, you know, back and forth every day, which was stressful on top of going full time, and I didn’t have much time to do anything else. I just had to pick a battle with that.

Participants also discussed stereotypes against Appalachians. Becka said the solution to these stereotypes could be that

people should come here and should see what it’s like to live here before they’re like, “Oh I’m never going down there” type thing, you know? We always get bad media, like the “Mountain Dew Mouth” thing and I’m like “Really?” My dad’s like, “They probably just got some random meth-head to talk.”...I don’t like the idea of people thinking that’s what we are, a bunch of hillbillies and people who don’t work and don’t go to school.

And she also spoke about reality of the current drug epidemic. Becka says that in her town, “people are either hooked on drugs or not doing nothing at all.” Felix spoke about his family’s and community’s struggle with drug use:

Still with drugs- the drugs are still there- you read it all the time, it's on the internet. But you don't see it [in other towns]. You know, you can drive down Cumberland Avenue in Middlesboro and see a car load of cops taking somebody off for meth. That's crazy. It's everywhere- it's just more concentrated here and you see it a lot more, and you see what it does to families. Coming from that type of family, you can't help but just to be like, "That sucks. What can I do?"... Yeah, like I said, my papaw, he was just an old hustler from back in the day. He sold dope here and there for 30-something years. I didn't even know him. The weird thing is my other papaw, he's a preacher, and I've heard more bad things about the preacher than I did the hustler [laughter].

Felix also spoke about the common struggle with poverty. He came to Southeast right after high school, but he did not have a support network to help with transportation or finances. In fact, he was homeless and, like many students, struggled financially:

My thing is, I got \$700 back from financial aid and well, "God, Almighty, I'll just make a career out of this." And they shut me down...I was 17 and I messed all that up, and I had to pay back roughly \$3,000. For somebody who don't have a home, a house, a trailer, nothing, no job, nothing- that's a lot of money, and so I paid all that money back and got back into school. I did an EMT course and passed it. Did an English course- passed it. And then got reinstated for financial aid and from then on I mean, the motivation was there...Got two degrees and about to get this degree. Associates in Arts and Science and then an Associates in Applied Science.

He volunteered to talk to incoming freshmen about college finances. Talking about his experience being dependent on financial aid, and then getting cut off, he said “I don’t want that to happen to these kids.”

Motivation for Coming to College

When asked what their motivation was for coming to college, some participants talked about the importance of a career to support themselves, wanting to help make the world or the region better, or college just being the expected next step. Several mentioned their life-long love of school and learning. The majority of participants however, immediately attributed their drive and goals as coming from their family, whether grandparents, parents, siblings, or children.

Family. Kylie stated “My motivation behind coming to college was mainly the drive behind my papaw....He pushed me all through middle school and high school to be the best that I could.” Natalie called college “a staple” in her family, that it was “expected.” She described how her grandparents were immigrants and they didn’t attend college and that she wanted “better things” for her and her future family. Participant Marie acknowledged the “driving motivator to go to college and for life in general” was her grandmother. She said, “She has been raising me since I was 8 years old and she has always, despite how hard it was, afforded the best for me- specifically in education.” Sophia answered that “I wanted to better myself and I thought Southeast was a good stepping stone to expand on my education. And I was motivated by my parents and my sister.” Annie spoke about how both of parents work in education:

They always stressed the importance of education to me. It was never a question that I wasn't going to go to school-- which I never *didn't* want to go to college. I always wanted to go because I have a strong interest in science and I knew if you wanted to be a scientist, you have to go to college. So it was never a question.

Emma had a similar experience as Annie, where she was being pushed strongly by parents, but it was something she wanted anyway. Their wording was extremely similar:

I guess I'm thankful for it- but [my parents] always pushed me. So, college was never an option. Failing's not an option. My mom would die if I was like, "Oh, I don't want to go to school." But ... I didn't feel like I *didn't* want to go to school. I enjoy school. I've always liked school. So, I think I was excited to go to college. ... And I guess in their minds, it's hard to make it without a college degree. So, they just, you know, want me to have a college degree and be successful.

The participants who are parents most frequently cited their children as their motivating force to go to college. Jillian, mother of a teenaged daughter, declared

My motivation has probably always been my daughter. And I now have a step-daughter... But, for the longest time, it was just me and [her] and she is sixteen now, she'll be eighteen in two years.... But it was something I always wanted. I wanted to prove to myself I could do it, I wanted to do it before now so I could help her with her education, but as it turns out, we may be going to college together at some point.

Gina, the mother of a small child, said her motivation was “first and foremost my daughter. She will always be my motivation for everything.” She continued by describing how she began cosmetology school when her daughter was a year old. “I hated it,” she said. She then struggled to find a direction and a way to support herself and her child:

I had no desire to do [cosmetology] for the rest of my life. And I was like, “What do I want to do?” And still, at my age, I’ll be 29 this year, I still don’t know what I want to do. How do you figure out life? You know, how do you figure out what you want to do for the rest of your life, at any age? That’s a heavy question....I had to do something. It was just me and her at the time. She was depending on me solely to provide for her and I was like “I got to do something!” So here I was.

One participant, Vaughn, cited his father for being the driving force for his coming to college, but not in a supportive way:

Well, my father told me that I was so stupid that I probably wouldn’t graduate high school. So my plan is to get a doctorate degree because he doesn’t even have a high school diploma....I don’t like people telling me I can’t do something. I really don’t. I have three tattoos and two piercings because of it. He told me, “Don’t you ever get a tattoo because I will burn it off of you with a blow torch.”...He told me I wouldn’t go to college. Here I am. Not the top of my classes, but I do pretty good for myself: SGA [Student Government Association], PTK [Phi Theta Kappa], SOGIA [Student Orientation and Gender Identity Alliance], and the honors program – which I consider up there above everything else.

Career goals. Other reasons participants credited for their motivation to attend college included everything from always wanting a specific career, wanting to work to improve the community, or just not knowing what else to do after high school. Nora described coming to college right out of high school: “I did it kind of feeling like it was an obligation at first. I actually came here for a semester and dropped out because of family problems. Crazy things happened.” She stated when she came back after some time away, she “started really learning things. That first semester was just like a buffer.” Participant Danielle touched on several topics in her answer including her love of education and the support of her family:

My motivation for coming to college-- oh my goodness. Well the motivation is probably directly tied to what I want to do with my degree, which is teach. And for me, teaching is directly linked to helping people. And more than anything in my life, I want to be somebody who helps people...And so if I can be that teacher who makes a difference in the life of even one student per semester, that's who I want to be....Some of my mom's favorite stories are that when she was in nursing school and I was four, five, six years old at the time, and I would crawl in her lap and “read” her textbooks and so that's kind of an example of education through osmosis....I've always been a student. I've always loved going to school....My grandma, love her heart, she was always on the road. She loved going shopping and after school she would pick me up and we'd go, sometimes all the way to Kingsport, Bristol, Johnson City [Tennessee], which was a blast for her...I would always have 1, 2, 3 books with me, and that was just always a part of my life. And

that continued up until high school when I started homeschooling....So yeah, that academic environment's just always been there and I never really lived without it.

Some participants spoke about financial concerns. William stated "Well, I was a first-generation college student. I saw my family sort of struggle, my parents especially, and my grandparents with just employment in general, at least consistent employment." He said his family experienced "a lot of coal mine work and getting laid off, that sort of thing, and I didn't really want to have to deal with that myself." Participant Iona answered with "My motivation for coming to college is honestly to be able to make a good amount of money that I can survive on." Felix also spoke of the need to be financially secure:

Working in fast food, I was 20 years old and I looked at the kid next to me who was like 17 making the same amount of money as I was and I was like, "We can't do that. I can't be that guy who's working fast food at 35 years old." That just wasn't it. I came to a realization that the only other way I was going to make any kind of money [was to] go to school for two years, four years, six years, eight years.

Estelle answered that her motivation was "I felt like I couldn't get a job without a college degree." She then said

I don't know that that's a good enough reason but, I just felt like- one, it's what I wanted to do because I love school. Academia is real art. It's always been so important to me and I kind of wanted to do it for my family too because I'm pretty much first-generation, but I knew that if I went to college I could get a job.

Ben had a military career and came to college for his second career. He described his decision to join the military: “It was something I’d always thought about doing. My father was in the Air Force, and when the Gulf War come around, being a little redneck, patriotic kid of eighteen, it’s just what I thought I needed to do.” After eighteen years of service, he was “trying to adjust to civilian life” and moved to southeast Kentucky, where his wife was from, and was “just trying to be able to fit in somewhere economically.” He was working as a fabricator on mining equipment and “then the coal industry kind of started getting real tough” and he decided to go to school for a career that is “a little bit more recession-proof.”

First-Generation Status

One common experience at community colleges and in Appalachia are students being first-generation, meaning the first in their family to attend college. The students had a variety of experiences—some were not first-generation, some were, and there was variation in how that influenced their experiences in college.

Becka said “I have two aunts that are LPNs and they’re going to go back to school to be RNs. But my mom and dad didn’t go to college. They went to high school.” A common experience was that parents had started in college, but did not finish for a variety of reasons. Iona’s mother was the first to go to college, but did not go until she was in her forties because of having a baby and then joining the workforce first. Iona said that was a help to her because her mother was a good source of support since she had so recently been through it herself- her mother graduating college during Iona’s senior year in high school. Participant Elizabeth described herself as “first-generation. My mom tried

to go one semester, but my sister was young, so she had trouble and she dropped out....She didn't [have child care help] and she decided she wanted to stay at home." Marie explained that the grandmother who raised her "never went to college and neither did my grandfather. My mother attended Southeast in the 90's but when she got pregnant with me, she dropped out. She may have planned to go back, but she died in 2002." Felix describes his family by saying

My mom came for like a semester and that didn't work out, so I guess to graduate from college, yeah I'm the first....Well she got pregnant with me when she was 17...But I guess- she was just on drugs and what-not. It just didn't work out for her. And my dad, actually, I don't know if my dad went to college or not but he owned his own business. But you know, he was never around.

William said "Well, I was a first-generation college student." He stated that both parents finished high school but that "my dad never finished college. I think he took maybe a semester and then he just quit." He continued on to say though his mother was "a big help as far as financial aid and stuff," he had no one to help him with actual coursework, that he was "pretty much left to [his] own devices there." Estelle described that her mother was a stay-at-home mom who got an online degree but "never did anything with it." She said "My older sister didn't go to school...so I'm like the [first] one. My stepdad didn't go. My dad dropped out."

Another theme to emerge was that parents and family members did not try college, or some did not even graduate from high school, or a combination. Marie described that her father "was a blacksmith and a moonshiner. He had no education

above high school.” Vaughn said “My mother finished and got her respiratory from Pineville. My father never finished high school.” Danielle explained how the difference she saw in her family between her college-educated mother and her illiterate father influenced her love of language and books:

My mom got her Associate's in Nursing from Southeast in '97 or '98. My dad has not been to college. I think he got maybe a 6th grade education and even then it wasn't very good. He's almost completely illiterate. He's gotten to the point now where he can recognize words and kind of piecemeal a simple sentence together. But his main way of entertainment and of being informed is television. And I think sometimes-- and maybe I hope sometimes-- that is part of the reason that I love language so much and am so interested in language because being right next to my dad all the time makes me aware that not everybody has that privilege of being able to open something as very simple as a book or picking up a piece of paper and being able to enter a world there.

Support Network

Participants had a variety of experiences when it came to having a support network. Some received most of their support and educational guidance from family. First-generation participants often did not receive help with college applications and financial aid paperwork from their families but were supported by them in other ways. Some were not and received most of their educational guidance from high school staff or Southeast employees, or no one.

Most participants had some kind of family support, whether that was help with the application process, childcare, or just encouragement. Annie had help with applications and paperwork because her parents work in education: “I never had much difficulty doing that. I got lucky in that sense.” Danielle described that, although her parents were always supportive, she did not have help with transitioning:

They have always been so supportive of me even when I came up with the weirdest stuff...and anything I came up with, they're like “Okay, fine, we'll do what we need to do.” But as far as transitioning into college, I had no idea what to expect. No idea. Before homeschooling, I had only gone to very small, private schools. Very, very small. I graduated my first private school-- which only lasted until 6th grade-- I graduated that school a class of *two*.

Gina discussed how having a child limited her choices because “my mom had to watch my daughter during the time that I was going to school so I couldn't go off to a big university, you know, and say, ‘Here's my kid!’ for three months at a time,” but having that support allowed her to attend Southeast. “The commute was like 25 minutes, which is not bad.” She described the stress of being a parent and a student and how important that support network was for her:

Yeah, there are times and I get emotional about this because I feel bad. I remember just calling my mom and breaking down one day because...I was so stressed out...I literally couldn't spend any time with my kid. Being a full-time student, full-time mom, it's hard, trying to juggle and balance and especially being in the honors program and trying to keep your straight As and your GPA

and there are times that you have to sacrifice time with your family so that you can do well and achieve your goals in school and your personal life. And there would be times when she would say, “Mommy, can you play with me?” and I would have to say, “I’m sorry, I have to get this done.” And there would be times that I would leave her alone in the room and stick on a movie as a babysitter and just go upstairs or in another room just to do my homework for hours....And I felt really, really bad about it and I remember one time I just broke down and I called my mom and I was like, “What do I do? I can’t quit school! I have to get this done! Will she forgive me? Will she understand?” and my mom was like, “I promise you, she will understand why you’re doing this and when she gets older, she won’t hold this against you. She will understand.”...So that was very difficult and my mom pepped me up with that when she was like, “It’s okay. You have to do this. You’re doing great, you have to get through this. She will understand and she will appreciate you. She will respect you.” I just want to show my daughter that you can do it, no matter how old you are, no matter where you’re at in your life, no matter if you have a kid or not, you can do it, you just need to push through so....Like, if you don’t take care of yourself and if you don’t accomplish what you need to in your life, you’re going to teach her that it’s okay to quit when you could be teaching all the positive things....No matter, you just try to find the balance. I don’t know that there is a balance, but you try to find a balance. Don’t beat yourself up because you’re doing the best you can and your kids know that so. It’s hard. It is.

Marie described that the grandmother who raised her was limited in how she could help:

Because of the generational gap-- the 64 years between us--my grandmother could get me as far as in the door to college, but didn't know specifics about programs or even what classes to take. That's not to say she was inattentive, just uninformed and unable. She still supported me through every step and was elated when I told her I was joining the honors program.

Some participants' high schools helped them transition to college, but many had to figure things out on their own. Becka explained she received most help with the paperwork to come to college from the high school. She said that her parents, who did not attend college, "always make sure I'm to class on time and stuff, [but] as far as application wise, I done that by myself." Lydia explained "I kind of figured it all out on my own. I didn't start college until I was older so I just came over here and asked a lot of questions and did it on all on my own." Estelle, who homeschooled, did not get help from the public education system to transition into college:

I kind of had to navigate that on my own. My older sister has enrolled at Southeast and she helped me learn how to do the FAFSA and stuff like that, and she helped me fill out my college applications, but my parents could never help me. So it was either my sister helping me or I learned myself.

Emma discussed doing most things herself because she is "independent." She said

I was like, "I gotta do this-- I gotta get this done." The financial aid stuff... I guess I'm not in debt. Well, now I am, because of [transferring]. But Southeast, I got

scholarships enough, so I just saved the scholarship and paid my way through that. So, my parents really didn't have to do anything for me.

Lack of guidance. Some participants found they did not have support or guidance at all. Nora spoke at length about the pressure she felt to go to college, and how her mother did not “really understand the point” of college and how not having guidance left her unclear as to what she should do or how to be successful at it:

I felt pressure from my peers at school, educators, just people in the community....[My mother] is kind of more of an independent learner so...she didn't really understand the point of college other than to get a certificate to do a certain thing, so when I felt this need for what seemed like no reason to immediately start going to college, she didn't really see the point of it...The only way I could communicate to her that I had this urge was that, “Well we need this for financial reasons. How am I going to be stable?” So then I just felt pressure to go and no direction....There was a lot of expectations that you will go to college if you are...performing at a certain level here. But at the same time, they don't necessarily have the information to facilitate the transition, especially from a really rural area here....And even amongst my friends, it wasn't something that we talked about. I think that maybe if their parents had gone to college, they had that help planning for [finances], even just the application process, what was relevant information, what was for your résumé and what wasn't...I was a very active student in school and I was also in advanced AP classes and did all that stuff. I was college-track, but I didn't have any support making decisions. So then

I kept getting closer and kept getting closer. I didn't know what to do so I was like, "Well, I'll just go to Southeast for a while and then see where that takes me." And it was the best decision for me, but at the same time it wasn't the right time and I've learned a lot, that there is an importance in timing, especially with myself.

Felix was another participant without a support network and those factors made his first attempt at college unsuccessful:

Well, I started when I was 17. Nobody told me to go. It was just like, I thought this is what you're supposed to do. Came here and didn't really have the right questions. And it just kind of didn't work out. I didn't have any focus to come to class. Which at one point, I was walking from [where I lived to school] twice a week- rain, snow, whatever....It's about an hour walk. But it got to the point where- you know that kind of motivation only gets you so far. You got to have other people who are like "Hey, go, get up and go to class!" It wasn't until I lost my financial aid that I started working. Then I started to realize, well if I can go to work, I can go to school. Which one will be more beneficial? And then I came back and I realized, "Okay. I got to ask this question and I got to ask this question" but the person who helped me the most was [an advisor] in financial aid. I came in and said, "What do I got to do?" And she gave me a list and said to do this, this, this, and this. And I did that, that, that, and that, and here we are.

Jillian also had a failed first attempt at college. She started college when her child was an infant, but found “It was just too hard.” She described it by saying “As far as support then, I had none. It was me and her. I had to just grow up.”

When I was in high school, I got into drugs and then it just escalated and it got pretty bad. And I just didn’t have-- you know how most people have family and some people don’t. I’m just one of those people that didn’t...It was go to work, figure out how to raise a child, get your own place, I mean, immediately. It was a wake-up. So, I tried. I tried going to school and working and the whole childcare thing. And then it was just not possible. I could not afford it, the time, trying to stay up all night doing homework, and work all day, and going to class at night, and spend time with my baby. It just wasn’t happening. And so finally I pushed it out of the way.

She described how different her support network is now that she’s on her second time attending college. She said she as a “good husband” who is “so supportive,” which “makes it a million times easier,” and now her daughter is older and is a source of support. “She pushes and she’s proud, and that really pushes me.”

Faculty

One subject participants were asked about was faculty. They were asked what kinds of student/faculty interactions were helpful or meaningful, and they were asked to compare their interactions with non-honors faculty to their interactions with honors faculty.

When discussing the professional skills she will need to be a professor, Annie said what makes a good teacher “is something I think about a lot.” She continued to say

I want to be a good professor. I’ve had bad professors; I’ve had great professors. I learned what *not to do* from the bad ones and what *to do* from the good ones. So I’ve been taking mental notes over the years. I want to be very clear with my students. I don’t want them to be afraid of me. I want them to be able to come talk to me about anything- grade-wise, whatever- and I want to be able to teach in a way that’s easy for them to understand without handing it to them. I don’t want it to be like “We’re going to go over the study guide and these exact answers are going to be on the test.” I want them to learn the information. Because that’s what they’re paying to go to school for; I don’t want them to leave empty-handed.

Kylie described what she appreciated about her non-honors chemistry teacher was how he would open up Blackboard Collaborate every Thursday night for students to seek feedback and help. She spoke appreciatively about his willingness to help students outside of class. Ben said all the professors he dealt with “have always been there” for him, “trying to explain things.” Jillian said she has several faculty that pushed her “with the whole scholarship thing. They’ve went way out of their way and I don’t even have them as teachers anymore. [They] try to help me, and help push me and of course I am forever grateful.” She continued to comment on the importance of participating in class so faculty get to know students, and how that brings opportunities:

I’ve noticed in a lot of classes, if you’re the student that never speaks, the teacher never notices you. You don’t stand out....I speak in about all of my classes. I

noticed it helps, it actually helps a lot. You know, they know you and then if something is going on, they're like "Hey, you need to really look at this," you know what I mean? Whereas the person sitting quiet, they don't know who they are. It really makes a difference.

Felix categorized the situation with his faculty as "They know me, I know them" and he said at large universities, students might not build that kind of relationship with faculty. He gave an example of one faculty member: "He'll call you, randomly, and be like, 'Hey! How are you? How're you holding up?...Keep your eye on the goal.'" Annie also spoke positively about personal interaction outside the classroom:

Mostly, if they're willing to stay after to class to talk, that's helpful. If they're just checking in outside of the classroom, I like to see that. That's nice. If they follow up with me about an assignment or a "Hey you did really good on that test the other day!" just something like that-- a little bit of positive reinforcement is always nice.

Vaughn commented that he likes student/faculty relationships to be "interactive- I want you to talk to me. I want education to be a two-way street." Gina gave an example of this when she talked about her non-honors psychology professor and how his story-telling and practice of considering students' opinions and interpretations helped her engage with the content:

He'll stand up there, he'll tell personal stories about his life-- and he has some good stories-- and to sit here and listen to his stories about his life, I love it. I

could listen to him all day long. And then he'll ask us questions to make us think about things. And then, basically, he'll say "Listen, there are no right and wrong answers here. I want to know how you feel" [and] then it makes me think. And I'm like, "This is awesome!" And I can't tell you how many times we took a test and he would mark an answer wrong and I'd be like, "I'm going to argue with you about this one" and he'd [say], "Well, I figured you would...What do you think?"...And I always had notes as to why I thought that my answer was right and I'd be like, "This is why I think it's wrong because this is what this means and in the story, I felt like he wasn't bipolar" or something like that and he would [say], "Huh. Yeah, I'll buy that." And that was always what he said. I don't think he ever told me no. When I argued a point with him and really expressed to him, he was always so open with me and it was never a right or wrong thing. It was, "Okay. How do you feel? How did you interpret that?" Most of the time, it was like "I'll buy that." So I love that too.

Emma discussed a deep connection with a faculty member at the state university she transferred to after Southeast:

Me and her just really clicked. I would go to her office, and...she taught middle school math...I want to go for high school math. So I would go to her office, and she would just teach me how to teach somebody something. I would use her markerboard, and we would just do math for an hour. It was nice getting to know her outside of just "oh she's my professor, and we're doing this certain thing right now." And then I told her about my mom [having cancer]. And her mom went through the same thing. And she actually gave me her cell number, and she was

like, “I’m giving this to you as a friend, not just your teacher.” I mean, I do think there are certain limits; there are certain lines you have to draw with your teachers. I know, personally, for me, I want to be that teacher that connects with students and cares about them. Not just, “Oh, I care about your school work,” but “I care what’s going on in your life.” I enjoy getting to know teachers on a personal level.

Danielle responded that what engages her is not dependent on the content of the classroom, but rather “something that happens in the atmosphere between the instructor and the students.” She explained it as such:

If an instructor’s teaching style clicks with my learning style, then regardless of whether I find the subject at all interesting, something will happen and we’ll just start bouncing back and forth off of each other. And I think that’s always been true for me. I’ve always found it really important to have good relationships with my teachers. I find it much easier to learn, much easier to relax in the classroom, much easier to seek help outside of the classroom if I have a good baseline relationship with the instructor and feel comfortable enough to cross paths with them in the hallway and just have a five minute “Hi, how are you?” conversation. And being able to have a good rapport with somebody like that-if that can transfer to the classroom, it doesn’t matter what they’re actually teaching me-- something will translate there and we’ll get something done.

Most participants discussed positive faculty interactions, but Nora gave an example of negative faculty interaction. She discussed her move from school in

California to school in Kentucky and teacher misconception and disappointment about her abilities:

There was a lot of expectation that I would be and perform a certain way because of where I came from.... I remember one time in particular, we had a spelling bee when I was in 7th grade, and they expected me to excel at that. Like, they thought I was going to win. And I got out in the first round. I'm terrible at spelling. I always have been. I didn't really learn that, you know. I learned to talk and listen to people before I learned to read and write so I didn't have that really click for me. But there was so much disappointment over that like, you know, people are better at some things. It was also seen as this "Well this really contradicts what we perceive about this person. Because here she is, she's performing so well in our classes and doing accelerated math and things like that" but it doesn't make sense that that is something that also fits in this character.

Honors Faculty

The participants overwhelmingly spoke positively of their honors faculty. They mentioned similar characteristics as they mentioned about their non-honors faculty, including willingness to help, building a relationship outside of class, and showing students that they care. Lydia showed how there were similarities between her teachers in and out of the program when she said

I feel like my honors faculty [are] a bit more laid back. They're very open and receptive to any questions that you have and are really easy to get along with. I

mean, I've had other teachers who were like that as well so I can't really say that is was *just* honors ...but I've enjoyed my honors faculty.

Some participants commented that they felt closer to their honors faculty because the nature of the honors class activities fostered deeper interaction. For example, Becka admitted "If anything, I'm probably closer to the honors teachers than I am any teacher that I've had." Iona said "I felt pretty close to all my teachers here, but especially to my honors teachers. Maybe because I was talking to them and I was always there, always following them around [laughter]." Emma summed up her experience by saying

I would go into [my campus honors faculty's] office and we would just talk. It was more personable....Some teachers you have, you don't have that connection. And a lot of it is the way the class is or what the class is about. My math classes, you know, you don't really get personal in there. It's more like you just get right to it...Well, in honors, it's a lot more communication, and in your other classes, most of the time, you're kind of just...sitting there listening. You're not really taking part in the class. So I definitely felt more close, or more, like, on a friend level with [honors faculty] than with other teachers.

Marie spoke about the same campus honors faculty member, saying

[She] was a tremendous help when I was transferring and was always a source of comfort and knowledge. If I had questions, I always knew her office was open. Upon entering the class, I knew I would love it. [They] are such incredible professors. Because of the way they have structured the honors program, students

feel accepted from the first day onward. They go above and beyond average instructors by taking the time and initiative to get to know students.

One of the topics that came up frequently was how spending more time with faculty fostered relationships. When reflecting on the ways her honors faculty were different than her non-honors faculty, Annie said it was similar in comparing her honors peers and non-honors peers:

We spent more time together, we knew more about each other, and we got to follow up with each other like “Hey, this assignment is happening next week, let’s talk about it” or “You did that paper the other day, that was great!” or things like that.

Nora also spoke about how having more contact with her honors faculty gave opportunities for stronger connections, which fostered learning. She commented on the difference between her honors faculty and the non-honors faculty she interacted with in her contract classes:

I also knew [honors faculty] longer and had contact with [them] more, and that was nicer, and I feel like it was different because of that. So there was more of like a long-term open dialogue which...is more conducive to learning something in the long run from a person anyway. In other classes, even classes that I had that I used as my contract classes...there wasn’t that same kind of open dialogue about the projects. It was more like, “This is the project that I’m going to set for you.”...But even then it wasn’t like we had an open dialogue about the projects so much....And I think part of that has to do with how short some of the classes are

and teachers getting used to not really having so much of a relationship with the students, which seems kind of crazy with such a small community environment and also small class size.

Vaughn echoed praise of his honors faculty and credited their personalities, and also the structure of honors experiences and how that opened the opportunity for those relationships to develop:

Now [one honors faculty member], broke the damn mold. Talking to [her] and talking to other people, it's so much different. [She's] on a different plane here. There's a difference between [her] and everyone else...but other professors? Some of them are really invested in their students and some of them don't care, and I think that's just with anyone. Like, if one of the honors advisors just decided to go "I don't care anymore" I think I would put them on a lower level than the rest of them, but you have interactions with students-- [honors faculty] send emails, *Facebook* messages, talking in class, interacting, wanting to know how we're doing, all of that...so I do see a difference with the honors and the non-honors but also I think once you get into deep interaction with people who are above your program or the faculty for your program, you're going to get deeper connections and more interest in your students....There's a difference in spending time with someone and getting to know them and "I'm here to teach you about history and then we're not going to talk for six months and you might take me again in a year."

Felix spoke about the faculty's workloads and that when faculty make an effort, it can be very impactful for students. He began by discussing an instance when, as a volunteer at a nearby National Park, he led a hike for honors students, and a faculty member went along and how that was meaningful to him. He also spoke of honors faculty taking students on days-long trips, conferences, and festivals:

It's hard to get people to do stuff like that. It really is. Not including you all's work load on top of that. To be like, "Okay, I'm going to take a full week out of my, what I know is a busy schedule." You guys- for students to see instructors who are willing to do that and have a good time doing that, that means a lot to students. Just like it means a lot to students when instructors hear them- but when you're stuck out in the woods with them for seven days- you know- it's not like being in a classroom and waiting 10 minutes after class and being like, "Hey can you look at this paper for me real quick?"

Several participants spoke about the honors faculty offering opportunities and personal advising. Marie described that the honors faculty "encourage students to further their education, recommend outside opportunities for their studies, like conferences, internships, etc.-- and, by understanding their students better, they offer meaningful advice and guidance." When William, a first-generation student, was asked to describe his support network as he transitioned into college, he named his campus honors faculty member. He had her as an English instructor his first semester and "pretty much from the get-go she was there, sort of reinforcing everything I was doing and spurring me to push my boundaries beyond what I was already doing." He continued to discuss his interaction with his honors faculty compared to his non-honors faculty:

It was a lot more frequent...even outside the classroom setting. Obviously in the classroom setting you have a lot more talking back and forth- it's a seminar and very student-driven, and they were inputting their own opinions a lot too...but even outside of class they- you know with the trips and things, you sort find yourself building a relationship with them.

Estelle had a unique perspective because after finishing Southeast's honors program and graduating, she transferred to a large university and joined their honors program. She spoke about her closeness to Southeast honors faculty compared to non-honors faculty, and how at her current university, she feels closer to her major program faculty than she does her honors program faculty:

It's kind of odd because you feel like the honors, at Southeast at least, my honors professors saw a different side of me and maybe valued my opinion, or maybe valued how I felt a little bit more than just being a standard history course. At [the university], it's kind of similar-- it just depends on the teacher. I ultimately feel more connected to my education program teachers, even though most of them I've never had more than once. I automatically feel more connected with them than I do with the honors professors over at [the university], but it was the opposite at Southeast.

Overall, the participant comments highlighted that their honors faculty possessed the qualities they liked in all teachers, and most commented that they felt closer to their honors faculty, which they contributed to the structure of the classes and the extracurricular activities.

Peers

Participants were asked about their interaction with honors and non-honors peers, what kind of interactions were helpful and enjoyable, and if there were differences in their interactions with the two groups. Some participants, particularly those who had already taken two, three, or four honors seminar classes, found there were profound differences in interaction with honors peers and non-honor peers. Several participants discussed negative peer interactions they encountered before college and the effects of those experiences.

Some of the participants had experienced bullying in K-12, and those experiences had lasting educational effects. Iona spoke about switching schools in sixth grade from public school to a private, religious school because of bullying. She said “I cried every day at home” and “I kept up with my grades. It was just miserable to go and get picked on all the time and go home and cry. I just didn’t feel like fooling with it anymore.” She described how the faculty became concerned because she was “reading all the time” and had withdrawn from her peers. Her family decided to move her to the private school. Estelle also opened up about being severely bullied in high school and how that drove her to choose homeschooling. When she then came to college, she struggled with socialization. This feeling of disconnection from her peers continued to varying degrees throughout her college experiences:

You date a boy, they treat you mean, they convince everybody else to treat you mean so it’s kind of one of those situations....I was skipping school. I’d become truant because I didn’t want to go to school because I felt so uncomfortable. I felt

so disliked. No one would sit with me at lunch because I didn't have lunch with my other two friends. It was just really bad and I just decided to homeschool because I wasn't showing up anyway and I didn't care about my school work as much anymore. So my mom convinced me to homeschool...and it was ultimately the better decision...[After coming to Southeast] I felt really uncomfortable for the first little bit because I was, for about a year and a half in the homeschool program, and because of that I felt very dissocialized. So when I got into my first class, I actually had class with people I had known from my schools and...it was kind of uncomfortable. So I felt very out of place. And I will say, ever since I've done the homeschool, I felt out of place almost, kind of non-traditional in a way, but I never had a hard time in the classes. I never felt like I had shorted myself on my education because of homeschooling. So, just the social aspect.

Ultimately, as an education major, Estelle felt her experience in various formats (public school, independent school, homeschool, community college, and university) and her experience with being bullied and struggling socially will help her become a better teacher:

I feel like having the experience of bullying has given me a zero tolerance for that kind of stuff. I know what to look for because I was a kid who just kind of let themselves go, didn't show up...I have the experience of homeschool so if these kids ever talk about homeschool or need a certain perspective, I can give that to students and parents and tell them that it's not as effective as you think sometimes when it comes to learning, unless you can be right on your kid. Because my mom did not help me, because she couldn't. She had dropped out of high school. So.

It's one of those things. But I feel like, with my experiences, it's given me a wider range of knowledge and ability to better serve people of my community in the future, even if it was hard at the time and set me back a little bit.

Non-honors peers. Emma, when asked about interaction with peers, said getting to know other students “on a personal level” is “important” for her. Kylie discussed beneficial interaction with her non-honors peers in her chemistry class and how they voluntarily formed a study group:

We always get together and form a group to study for these exams and get our homework done. And it's not required. But we still feel the need to get together because we all help each other in a different way....And we all have different perspectives on things and when we all come together we can kind of look at from different directions.

Jillian expressed dissatisfaction in her lack of interaction with peers in the two-year college honors society Phi Theta Kappa (PTK). All students who qualify for PTK with a 3.5 GPA also qualify to be in Southeast Honors Program, which requires a GPA of 3.25, so many students who are in the honors program are also PTK members. The honors program, though, is not officially linked to the national honors society:

Like, with PTK, I joined it and it may or may not help with something, with a scholarship, I don't know. But I haven't done anything else in it....It doesn't require anything of me. Like I said, I like the challenges, I like being part of an organization. I like being a part of something with other people and feeling we've achieved something. And the ceremony with PTK was nice, it was, but that's it.

That's all of it. Every now and then, we'll get an email and I think one time I helped recruit, but that's been the limit of my experience with PTK. So I'm a member of something and we don't do anything. And what's to be proud of that?

Honors Peers

The reoccurring themes that emerged from participants discussing interaction with their honors peers was meeting new people and building friendships, that honors peers had similar interests and were more open than non-honors peers, that interactions with honors peers were deeper or more complex, and that honors peers were often their gateway into the program. Vaughn encapsulated a common theme that students expressed, that the structure of honors experiences, like extracurricular events, gives opportunities for different interaction with honors peers:

[In non-honors classes], honestly it's not like we spend any form of interaction outside of sitting next to one another in class, and maybe doodling on each other's paper, that's it. With the honors program you're out, you're talking to these people, we're on big rides on Bertha [Southeast's bus]. Fifteen hours on a bus you're going to get some connections with some people-you're going to talk to someone....This is horrible of me, but there is a girl in my anatomy class whose daughter was in a four-wheeler accident, and her daughter is in Knoxville in critical condition, and I've not heard a word. Now, say Lydia had a daughter and something happened to her, you best believe I'd be messaging [her] every other fifteen minutes "How's your daughter? What's going on? I need to know-- tell me what's going on!" All that stuff. And I still have relationships with people that

have graduated....You build relationships in the program, more than just “Hi we had history that one time together.”...I’m pretty sure that trip to Florida was more than an entire semester’s time together.

Meet new people. One outcome of the honors seminars is that participants met students from other campuses, since seminar classes are conducted over ITV and there are multiple cross-campus get-togethers each semester. Elizabeth attributed taking class trips with other campuses and the seminars’ small class size with allowing students to get to know each other better. She compared her time at Southeast to her current state university experience when she said she prefers face-to-face interaction and small classes. She stated at her current university, “the classes are bigger so you can’t really interact.” Kylie said she enjoyed meeting and working with people from the other campuses. “I liked getting to interact with people I had no idea who existed and just through this class I got to meet them even though they were on a different campus, because I like getting to meet new people.” Marie stated that her interaction with honors peers and non-honors peers was “not that much different” because she was a tutor on her campus, so she “knew most everyone on campus anyway.” She echoed Kylie by saying “What the honors program also allowed was for me to meet people from other campuses. I met students from Whitesburg and Cumberland and Harlan that I began friendships with and was able to learn valuable lessons from.”

Several participants commented that the friendships they forged through the honors program were important, meaningful, and lasting. The reasons they cited for this different dynamic with honors peers was often the discussion-based nature of the seminar

classes, the personal topics and assignments, the extracurricular activities, and the amount of time spent with each other.

Annie said she felt students got to know each other “on a personal level” because class conversations were “so in-depth.”

We talked about personal experiences and things like that, and then [spent] time together outside of the classroom with our extra activities and trips and stuff. We spent a lot of time together and we got to know each other and became friends.

I’m still friends with a lot of my honors people today.

Emma also mentioned how these discussions built friendships, and she said it fostered a sense of belonging:

I enjoyed meeting the people that I did. I wouldn’t have probably talked to the people in the class if I hadn’t had honors. I didn’t have any other classes with them, besides [one honors peer]....Once I joined honors, I felt like I kind of belonged, if that makes sense. Like, I didn’t feel awkward or out of place. I felt like, oh, I have all these new friends. And, then, too, honors was more of a place where you could just get personal. And this kind of goes along with talking about some pretty serious subjects. But I could go in there, and I could talk about my family or my home life, or this or that, and it was okay. In other classes, you can’t. I mean, you could, but not as much as you can in honors.

Gina reflected that most of her friendships from Southeast came out of her honors program classes and experiences:

For the most part, all of my lasting friendships that came out of this school were all in honors...I mean, I talked to people here and there that weren't in honors. But I just feel like when you are in an honors class- especially I took four semesters of it with the same people- you really get to know people and you connect with them on more of a personal level, and you go outside of school and you do things with them and it's just a different type of relationship. And so, my friendships that I have built in this school...is because we were in the honors program together.

More open / common interests. One of the themes that emerged when participants were discussing interaction with honors peers and non-honors peers was that their honors peers were more open, smarter, more inquisitive, and shared common interests. Several participants, when beginning to discuss the differences they found, began by expressing that they were going to sound arrogant or mean by what they were about to say. Participants were aware of the differences between their honors peers and non-honors peers, and they felt as if they were passing negative judgement on their non-honors peers by stating those differences aloud.

Lydia mentioned that honors peers can "be helpful as far as understanding the work load" of being in the program. She continued to say

I don't really interact with too many people honestly outside of honors. I feel like I talk to more people in my honors class because of the way the class is structured. I feel like those people are a bit more open-minded, in my honors

class, just because of things that we talk about and the way that everybody is able to give their opinion.

Nora also commented that honors peers, despite having different interests, were “like-minded.”

There was an immense importance of having that connection with people who were like-minded. None of us were really interested in the same things, but we all had the same kind of drive which, sometimes, that can be hard to find and connect with in this kind of community college environment...And so it was really helpful to have that group of like-minded individuals.

When asked if there was a difference between interactions with honors peers and non-honors peers, she continued to say

Oh yes. Immensely. Huge. All of my friends were in the honors program. All of the people that I was close to or talked about things with were in the honors program, which is kind of saying something because it wasn't like I didn't have contact with other people. I had contact with other people on a daily basis. I was working here and I was seeing people who were going their regular, traditional community-college-experience route, and a lot of them were coming from that same background like I was saying earlier with the “you need to be a physical therapist because there's going to be jobs in this industry,” and it was very hard to connect because there was a huge difference in mindset. I don't know if it was merely like an openness? I don't know. But it was dramatic. It is dramatic. They weren't, on a very basic level, they weren't as open to exploring different ideas.

William noted how it was interesting to meet his honors peers in person after only knowing them through the ITV system. He stated he found his honors peers to be open to other viewpoints and it was “mentally stimulating and sort of liberating to talk about stuff with people you know aren’t going to harshly judge you or criticize you for your opinion.” He said this led to encountering “lots of other viewpoints that you can sort of simulate into your own world-view.” He ended by saying that openness is “really nice” to experience. When asked about other differences between his honors peers and non-honors peers, he began with “To an extent I think - I don't know how to word this without sounding arrogant.” After thinking, he explained

I found myself more prone to having sort of intellectual conversations I guess with honor students, and not really as a deliberate thing like “I'm going to talk to this person about the meaning of life” or something like that you know, but it comes up-- it's more in-depth conversation I think than taking to my normal friend group on campus.

Like William, other participants cautiously paused and almost pre-apologized for what they were about to say about non-honors peer interaction. Vaughn started by saying “I am going to sound horrible when I say this-- the honors people think more.” He joked that “a lot of us people in the honors program are socially awkward. I don't know why we attract other socially awkward people.” He continued

But we all get along so well, and I think it's the grace of the gods that gives us all of these people that have great chemistry together. Being completely honest,

there's only one person who I've been in the honors program with who I didn't like.

He continued to discuss how discussions with honors students make him think more:

The honors seminar classes are not a one-sided lecture. We are told from the beginning "I want you to think about this. I want you to think, and plan, and figure out what you're wanting to say and how you feel about it." So I feel like we are...conditioned into thinking on this higher plane than these other students who are just here because "well I'm told I'm supposed to get an education." Does that make sense? I want to say that the conversations between honors students are much deeper. Because I know when I'm talking to another honors student, I'm thinking about more stuff, and I don't do that when I talk to regular students. Like if you're going to want to talk to me about some new video game, I'm not going to think as much as if you want to talk to me about Plato's philosophy during those classes. So the thing that comes to mind is dumbing it down, but I don't think that much about conversations with regular students as I do with honors students. I guess it's because I don't think I'm that smart with the honors students because some of our kids are really damn smart, and then I'm like "well, shit. I have got to be smarter."

Jillian buffered her comments by saying "I don't feel like I'm better than them, I don't mean it in that way" when discussing the differences inside and outside the honors program. Felix began by saying "Well, I hate to say it this way, but it's like you have

more intellectual conversation.” When asked what he meant by “more intellectual” he explained

Well, I tutor. So I have intellectual conversations with individuals all the time, but...I can only go over the cell so many times before it becomes like reading Dr. Seuss. But then you know, you have these honors students who, in class, are coming up with controversial discussions or trying to pick at “What’s wrong with this?” “How does this affect you all?” So that’s not like saying, “Hey, let’s go over this cell so I can learn it real quick.” That’s like, okay, you studied this, I studied this...and now we can talk about it as educated people.

Danielle had the same impulse to buffer what she was about to say by expressing that she would sound arrogant as she discussed the differences between her interactions with honors peers and non-honors peers:

How do I say this without sounding really arrogant? This very well might sound really, really arrogant-- to be able to sit down and have a conversation with other students who have an honors mentality is really refreshing, and by that I mean students who have original thoughts and who are capable of developing their own thoughts and not just branching off of what somebody else told them. And students who, even when they have really bad days, and are like, “Ugh. I hate school. I hate homework. I hate everything” they still realize the value of education and they *still* realize the importance of not just getting stagnant in your life and your thought processes, in your academic experience in general. Just being around like-minded people is one of just the most...yeah-- Well, every

thought that just popped into my head immediately sounds arrogant to me. I think it's because to just be very frank about it, if you're in the honors program, chances are you're among the smartest people in your regular classes. And I don't know, I think it's really easy to get uppity about it when you know that you're the smartest in the room, when you're told you're the smartest in the room. And when the other students realize that you are. And you can get really cocky about it and to an extent. That's not a bad thing because it does drive you to keep doing better, to keep pushing yourself, but then when you start projecting negative things onto other people-- that's when it does get bad, and I think that there's such a fine line between taking pride in something and just having academic hubris, and it's difficult to separate those things.

Becka described connecting with honors peers, and also how non-honors peers view the honors program:

When I first started college, it was kind of difficult for me to talk to people that I didn't know. But there was some that was just so easy to approach, like [another honors student]. Forever, I didn't talk to him but when I started hanging out in the tutor lab, I realized he's actually really fun to hang around and I like him a lot. And when we went to the Florida trip, it was fun to be around him and the others....I think it's better to have... peers and stuff because you don't want to tell your teacher everything. You don't want to make them feel bad or anything like that and some of them really just don't care. But when you have somebody, like a peer, that's going through the same thing...it's easier, for me, to talk to that

person. I can talk to [honors peers] about anything. I can talk to them about some type of research in science or anything. But just my normal friends who are not in it- they kind of are just like “eh.” They want to talk about things like normal people would. A lot of them are actually afraid to be in the honors program because they think that’s all you talk about. But in the honors program, we don’t always talk about certain things like science and stuff, we also talk about current events and poetry and writings and all that....So, it’s not all just smartsy stuff. It’s some fun stuff. And I don’t think they realize that.

Iona spoke about how she was closer to her honors peers at Southeast than her peers at her transfer institution. She said her peer interactions outside of her major program now are “a lot more distant” and that “there’s not a way to get to know people who aren’t in your program.” She continued to say “At Southeast, I knew everybody I passed because it’s so small. But you go there and pass somebody and you’re like, ‘I have never seen you before in my life and I come here every day.’” Estelle discussed how she felt closer to her Southeast honors peers than her non-honors peers, but now that she has transferred to a large state university, she is having the opposite experience in her new honors program. She felt closer to her peers in her major program than her peers in the university’s honors program, which is what she also said about her interactions with faculty. She said

I married in college- that’s non-traditional. I graduated high school early- that’s non-traditional. So, on every level, I feel like I am just not a traditional college student compared to a lot of my peers. So it kind of makes me uncomfortable, but

at the same time, it gives me more of an advantage because I have different experience and aspects of life...I think it's kind of funny because some people who were in the [Southeast] honors program were definitely non-traditional- some people might've been in their 30s or...just different, and they made it feel normal to me. To be a little bit different, to have a different situation than going straight from high school into community college...but there were people of all different types in the honors program. And we all had a sense of community because we all had the differences about us. So I didn't feel like I was the odd one out. I felt like I was normal because everyone else had something a little different about them. So we had people who had also been in the army, people who were first time going at it straight from high school, so it was interesting and I felt normal because we had such a widespread group of people...I feel like at Southeast, we were all on this same level, we were all happy to see each other, we were sad when people were not in the class at the time. I see some of the honors people from Southeast out, and I'm just so happy to see them. But [the university], it's a larger honors group. I have never consistently had another person in the class with me that I've connected with because it's just so many different people taking so many different courses.... I don't have the same people that I'm working with, so it makes it difficult for me to treat people in honors the same as the people in my courses I'm taking for my education program because the people in my education courses, we've been together almost two semesters now, same group, so I'm close with them. They're not in honors, none of them are. But I'm closer with them. In honors [at the university]...there's some brilliant people in there. I consider

myself to be pretty smart, but I feel like some of the people in there- I don't want to say the word *entitled* because that's wrong- but they don't want to be friends. There's a certain degree of they want to separate the honors group from people maybe they dorm with, or people who are in their program, so there's not this big connection of everyone is friends in there....I don't talk the same with honors students at [the university] as I do non-honors students because there is a severe disconnect with the program. I initially started to volunteer, trying to get involved, but my feelings of being non-traditional...I'm just kind of flip-flopping around in the middle. And it's kind of hard for them to catch everybody, but it doesn't feel like it's as inclusive in the honors classes and you feel a little bit more judged....It's kind of like a piranha pit sometimes. I don't know if it's competitiveness or if it's just judginess [laughter].

She spoke of an assignment in one of her university honors classes where students were critiquing student teaching videos and how the professor commented on the competitive behavior between the honors students. Estelle said the professor commented "From my experience, you guys are brutal. When you watch this, the funny thing is, you all make the same mistakes, but you all are brutal." Estelle discussed how her university honors program offers events, like a pizza night or a cheesecake reception after a campus performance, but she feels disconnected and it is hard for her to be excited about these events:

I'm not connected with anybody in the program and I would've loved to have brought my husband [to events]. And he was automatically out of the chance to go with me, and having a confidante there would have made me feel a little bit

better...But they'll have these events to try to connect. They have 1,400 honors students or something like that and, not everybody's going to be as involved as some people. I want to be, but I have really felt out-of-place and I couldn't find anybody to connect with, and it's very clique-y in some sense, so I was better off just focusing on my studies than trying to worry about the emotional aspect because it was causing me stress trying to fit in, if that makes sense. ...But, if I could go back and do it all over, I would do Southeast ten times over again before I did [the university] [laughter].

Estelle then articulated specifically what it was about Southeast's honors program that was different and better:

I felt more connected to my honors peers at Southeast. I also feel like, it was a smaller group, to some extent, we could get the whole gang together and go sit at the same table at Mexican, that would be all of us.

She also mentioned the difference between her Southeast honors class discussions and her non-honors class discussions:

[In non-honors classes] there were a lot of times when we would try to have discussion and it would turn into arguments in the classroom about gun control, about women's rights, about all this stuff, but we get into honors and everybody has different opinions, and we debate but we never argue. And we all locked into that "It's honors, we're good to go." But I feel like there was just so much chaos sometimes in my non-honors groups.... I felt like in honors we were all opinionated, we were able to discuss and not argue, and I think that whole basis of

not being able to talk to some people because you're afraid of offending them made it difficult to connect to those people rather than in honors where I felt like it was a free environment and we could discuss opinions and my opinion was safe....It makes it easier to be yourself, it makes it easier to talk about things that matter or that bother you which allows you to talk to people because I feel like people connect over tragedy and they connect over their opinions, and it's hard to get over even that first wall of stating how you feel with others.

She spoke of how the experience in Southeast's program affected her overall:

I feel like I gained a lot of confidence because I feel like I was kind of lacking that after homeschooling and after dealing with that bullying then having to pick myself up and kind of go it alone. Whenever I was in honors, I felt like I was in a community, I was appreciated, my work was appreciated, and I was able to be challenged. We were able to have sessions where we could really discuss and hit some tough topics that we don't always get to discuss in class and we were able to open up and share with each other in a safe environment. So I have shared my experiences before and that was meaningful to me and other people have shared their own experiences; I felt mostly normal as a student-- more so than I did any other time-- and I also made friendships, connected with professors and I'm still connecting with them long term. And it's just- I felt like my work was significant. Whatever I did in there- even if it's not something I picked back up, I feel like what I did mattered....I think, overall, it makes me sad to think about, because it matters so much to me. It was just so important to me at that point in my life. It was the classes I looked forward to. Anytime we did an event, I wanted to be out

there...I wanted to get involved. It's harder now because I'm not having that same experience or want to be present in the honors program. I don't feel as valuable...But, Southeast, keep that community. It doesn't matter how big of a group of students you get, make sure that that community stays- that safeness of being able to discuss stays in that. Even if the funding isn't there, try to find outlets for your kids, try to promote your students to the highest degree so that other people want to know your students because you know they're worth it. That's how you made me feel.

Ben said one of the differences he noted between his honors peers and his non-honors peers was that "those kind of classes were with students that wanted to be there." He continued

Some of the other classes, you would see people that were here just kind of collecting the Pell Grant. And that's the only thing that I find unfortunate, because there's so many students- even older students that when they come back, they *want* to be here, they may not have access to those funds, because they're being spent somewhere else. So I don't like it. A lot of people *want* to be in college, and some people are just screwing it away for a check. So it's unfortunate-- that's the only thing I can say....You would see the class numbers maybe drop after that time frame. But you never seen that in an honors class. They were always people that wanted to be in school.

Motivation for Joining Honors Program

When asked to discuss their motivations for joining the honors program, participants listed knowing students who were already in the program, wanting to get involved in something on campus, faculty recruiting them into the program, and using the program to improve their résumés, applications, and CVs.

Other people. Ben said he wanted to join the program because of how the seminar courses were described to him. He sat in on a couple seminar class periods before deciding to join.

Just the kind of people that were in the class, you just had people that were more sure of themselves, more confident. You could have an intelligent conversation with them, you could actually agree to disagree. We could have banter back and forth and be sitting on opposite sides of the table. So I enjoyed the classes, and that's the reason why I was attracted to it when it was explained to me. Once you get a taste of it, it's hard to not keep coming back to those classes.

Nora answered that one of her motivations was already knowing two students in the program. "And you know, it was more interesting to me because I had already met them previously. I had them in [English] class before." She continued to say "It's always been my mindset that if there's an opportunity, try it and then see how you like it, and then become more involved that way-- and I did immediately like it." Marie similarly said her motivation to join was her best friend: "She had joined it the previous semester and I heard nothing but good things about it from her." Emma first learned of the honors program when two honors faculty members went to her high school to talk to seniors

about the program. Then after she started at Southeast, one of her friends was in the program and recommended she join. She spoke with her campus honors faculty about the program and was interested in the interdisciplinary curriculum that would "deal with the arts." She said, "I thought it would be interesting to kind of see what it was about and get into that." She described her motivation to join the program as follows:

And I guess I wanted to do honors because I always have wanted to go the extra mile- to do the extra stuff, and not just kind of skate by. And I thought it would be a good opportunity to go outside of my comfort zone, and be a part of something besides just going to class and then leaving, if that makes sense.

Other participants also wanted to be in the program for social or community reasons.

Sophia said she "wanted to be part of something on campus."

I thought that by getting involved that would help expand and open doors and I really wanted to do something that my parents hadn't done or my sister hadn't done and I thought the honors program would be a very good thing to get involved with...Like, get to know more people on different campuses rather than just here on [my campus].

Vaughn was told about the program by his campus honors faculty. He said he was motivated to join the program in part because he was unsatisfied with the classes in his major. He joined the program so he "could do cool stuff. That was about it." He asked himself

Do I really just want to sit through [more of these] classes, and do nothing but listen to [the professor] talk, get the study guides off Quizlet, and take the test? Or do I want to take contract classes...and do the cool research and stuff?

Another motivation he mentioned was to affect how people think of him. “I get to tell people I’m an honors student. And honestly, there’s a lot of people who knew me from high school, that’s like, ‘You’re a what?’” He also mentioned how people would not assume he’s successful in school because of his tattoos, piercings, and hair (a purple and pink faux-hawk at the time of the interview).

Danielle was invited to attend the annual Idea Festival in Louisville by an honors faculty member and that was her introduction to the program. She felt the faculty invited her as a way of “saying, ‘Hey I think you would fit here in this program and this is what you would do there.’... I just instinctively knew that it would be one of the best things I could’ve done at Southeast.”

Challenge and professional development. Lydia heard a faculty member speak about the program and it seemed “really interesting” and she thought being in the program would keep her “on track” in keeping her grades up. Estelle was invited to join by an honors faculty member and, having been in Gifted and Talented program in middle school, she assumed it would be something similar. She stated her motivation to join was “I wanted to be challenged, someone believed in me, and I knew it would make my family proud.” Kylie heard about the program when an honors faculty member spoke at freshman orientation and that piqued her interest. She said she was looking for the honors program to provide professional opportunity and benefit:

A lot of it was just the credentials, and being part of something, an organization at Southeast, because we don't have too many organizations here to be honest, and I wanted to be a part of what all I could and get all the experiences that I could while at college. I was thinking that it's really going to improve my writing skills and my communication skills.

William pointed out the obvious "accolades" of being an honors graduate and how that can help with jobs, but he stressed his reason to join the honors program was different. He described how he sat in on a few seminar class meetings and witnessed the class discussions and then decided to register for the next seminar. "I feel like that was something I was kind of lacking, or just the area in general is kind of lacking, as far as progressive issues at least. Discussion is not very encouraged," and so he was "happy to get involved with it."

Natalie said she "liked the title of graduating with honors [laughter]. That was nice. I think that was the biggest thing." She continued to say when her campus honors faculty invited her to join, "it just seemed like a good idea." Gina learned about the program from a student currently in it and at first was "kind of scared" of the extra work, but after the campus honors faculty explained the requirements and benefits of the program (including graduating with honors distinction), she decided to join. She asked herself "Why wouldn't I do that?...I always strive to do the best that I can anyways, so why not participate in that?"

Jillian was also introduced to the program by a student currently in it, and she saw the program as an opportunity for professional development:

I was at my Phi Theta Kappa ceremony and there was a girl there that had set up a table and [a student in the program], he was like, “Come on! You have to meet so-and-so! And you need to be in the program!” And so he introduced me, and I read everything and was immediately interested. I’m for anything that just helps everybody achieve their goals and shows and helps people that’s worked hard....I was drawn to it so I joined it....I think that’s worth it and I think it’s going to pay off in the long run, like, on these college applications and especially when it’s time for résumés and jobs-- I think that’s when it’s really going to show.... You wouldn’t call it that, but I think that in a way it’s one big job building skill, looking at it from my age [early 30s]. That’s a good way of putting it....I think the whole idea of the honors program helps with job building skills and résumés. It helps make you look above the person sitting next to you.

Becka also noted the appeal of putting the honors program on applications when she said, “it’s going to look good on other applications and it’ll look good when I go for a job, and I needed to stay busy.” Emma echoed the résumé advantage when she said “I really just kind of wanted my transcript to look good, first off, but then I really enjoyed the classes so that kind of pushed me to continue in it.” Gina also spoke about the résumé and application benefits:

I did look at like, “Well okay this will look good on a transcript, this will look good on a résumé.” And if there’s me and somebody else and they have a 4.0 GPA but I have 4.0 GPA *and* an honors transcript, then they’re going to look at me first. And I was thinking also about getting into other schools with that degree....That was my motivation for joining honors, and from there I joined PTK

and from there I joined the SGA and I was just trying to build up a résumé to look good on me and also to push myself because I wanted to be involved with people who are driven and people who are intelligent and really want to work at achieving their goals.

Vaughn said honors “looks good on transcripts” and then joked that “When people ask, ‘What does it mean: honors?’ You know, we took this class which was probably already as hard as you think it was, then we added 20 extra percent.”

Felix, who is involved in student organizations and serves on a KCTCS systems-level committee, said he first heard about the program from other honors students. He described how he noticed the honors students were “getting together having these big discussions...and talking about these cool things and cool trips and all these cool instructors” and that made him interested in the program. His motivation for joining the program was that he was doing well in school and “you give credit where credit is due.” He spoke about how he values being an example for other people, especially those who have struggled in the ways he has:

Of course, you have to work for it in the honors program, but once that work is complete, you can walk across that stage and be like, “Hey, you guys can do this too.” That’s the main thing for me. Like when I did the guest speaking for the GEN 101 classes, people just coming into college, I’m looking at these kids and I hate to judge them but everybody does it. I’m looking at these kids...who were just like me and I’m thinking, “Man, you’re going to struggle.” So I’m in there and you know, it’s when I had my big one-inch gauges in my ears and my

piercings and my tattoos and everything and I'm like, "Hey you guys can do it too. Just because you are this person, doesn't mean that everybody is going to look down on us. If you put forth the effort, people will realize that."... The honors program for me is helping to prove to other people that, "Look, it doesn't matter who you are." To me, this is the most honorable thing you do. You are in the *honors* program. What else can you do? To prove to everybody and yourself, "Hey I'm top of the line." Not including everything that comes with it, you know. You graduate with honors and you put that on your résumé. You meet individuals that you can use throughout the rest of your life. You can stay in contact with these people. And just coming through with a 2.3 through college-- that doesn't really get you a lot. It'll get you a degree, but if I graduate medical school with a 2.3 as opposed to someone who's got a 4.0, who's getting the job?

Intellectual Needs

Participants were asked to describe what kinds of assignments, classroom activities, and projects they find most enjoyable and engaging. Answers included they enjoy challenges and discussions, do not enjoy lectures, want to feel connected to their topic/project and feel it is meaningful, and they are "hands-on" learners.

Being challenged. Several participants stressed the importance of being challenged by their work and their classes. Estelle wanted to be challenged and that encouraged her to join the honors program. She stated "It feels like I was challenged differently than I would've been if I didn't taken an honors course." Jillian also said she likes to be challenged:

I piled on the sciences and I found throughout this whole thing that science challenged me. I would have to really study hard to get ready for midterm or get ready for a final or a test, and I loved it....I love something that challenges me. In about every class I've been in, there's writing assignments and of course, when I transfer, I know there's going to be more, I know that. And I feel so burnt out on them, just being honest....But with writing I love to be challenged so I think I enjoy it more if it challenges me.

Nora discussed how her high school did not offer AP classes, which she wanted to take. They were offered in the high school one county over but she did not have access to them. She described how the AP teachers at the other school "were able to explain things" and answer questions compared to her teachers who "maybe didn't know the subject as well as they should to be teaching it." She wanted the challenge of AP classes but could not take them.

Estelle had experienced a wide variety of school formats before coming to Southeast. She went to public school, and then went to an independent school, and then she was homeschooled. She commented in which ways her educational and intellectual needs were and were not met in the various formats. She spoke about being in the public school's Gifted and Talented program, but how even that did not meet her needs:

I was in Gifted and Talented for reading and leadership....We played a lot of chess. I felt like they didn't do what- nowadays when I'm teaching in like middle schools that I'm doing observations in- they have rotations and are able to play that up and actually do things with these kids, get them to do different community

service based stuff. In fact, whenever I was in it, we would just sit around and we would read like a short story together and talk about it. We would play chess. We would read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. It didn't feel like it was a reward; it didn't feel like it was a challenge. It just felt like we were there and we're going to do something that we wouldn't normally have to do.... We would play a lot of Sudoku and I am not gifted in numbers, so it felt like I was there not for the reason that I should've been there. So I was struggling with the Sudoku puzzle and I'm gifted in reading so- it felt like I was getting retention services for math [laughter], instead of getting promoted in what I was interested in.... I mean they didn't cater it to what you were supposed to be gifted in... They tried to push you to join Academic Team and Future Problem Solvers.

When asked what she would do differently to improve the Gifted Talented program for students, she said "I would actually listen to what they're talented in and help them explore other talents, but also be able to focus more on whatever they're gifted and talented in and honing that skill." She also stressed that not having students in these programs do community service projects was a missed opportunity to help students apply concepts "to real world situations," and she ended to say "right now, the gifted programs are lacking really bad."

When asked to speak about her experience moving into a homeschool setting, she quickly said "It was too easy."

It was too easy because the materials- they don't take Gifted into consideration, and they don't take if you score a certain way into consideration- because they

can't. They don't have the time. They're an online program based in Pennsylvania. They send you these booklets, so I was reading Shakespeare but the thing is, I didn't really have to read it. I just had to skim for the answers and, of course being the smart kid I am, I'm not going to waste my time doing something I feel doesn't matter to me. So I would skim. Some things I took more seriously than others. The only thing I had trouble with was the math. I've always had difficulty with math. I never really had a good math teacher so I actually had a friend who was in the program with me and we were moving at the same pace and she helped me with math and I helped her with her English. So we had a buddy system....But it was too easy. And when I got to college, I felt like I was a little bit behind on some things, but for the most part, I didn't feel like I had missed out. The only thing that I hated was I felt like the independent school was very, very intense academically. They were all about their grades- the grading scale was different then than the public school. They went 95-100 as an A, when the county was 90-100 was an A. So when I did homeschooling, it was a shift because I had always been so challenged because I'd been in the independent school since 5th grade. And it was sophomore year when I started doing homeschooling, so I felt like I was too advanced for this stuff and I did graduate a year early. So I had about two years of high school in one year.

Hands-on learning. One of the comments that reoccurred was participants preferring hands-on, participatory learning instead of passive lectures. Iona said "I really like a project that I can get hands-on with" and "I'm a very kinesthetic learner." Vaughn said "I need more engagement than just 'Today we're going to talk about the War of

1812' in one monotone voice for another hour. I can't do that, I lose interest. I have ADD probably." He continued to say "I'm a hands-on person. I know with interactive part of the honors program, that's not really hands-on...but we talk to each other- it's not a one-sided lecture." Felix echoed those ideas by saying "That's how I learn best- kinesthetically. Just moving around." Elizabeth said the same: "Yeah. I don't really like [lecture-and-exam classes] as much. I feel like I'm kind of a kinesthetic learner," and she discussed how she really liked the assignment making a *YouTube* video in one of the honors seminars because she likes "hands-on projects." Annie, a science major, said "I definitely like being out in the field the most. Getting to see, touch, feel, hear everything. I'm not much on reading when it comes to my work," and that her favorite is "being out in the field with the plants, animals, and insects....I like the action. You never know what you're going to see, because you can't plan it."

Emma mentioned how she likes being creative, which she doesn't often get to do in her classes. She said she always told herself that she wasn't creative, "And then I got in honors, and I got to do a lot of stuff, and I surprised myself. Like with the [graphic novel workshop] we did. I didn't think that I would be capable of doing something like that." She also discussed exploring the creative part of her through the identity mask painting workshop and her capstone project, where she painted an image she felt visually represented an instrumental piece of music. About that capstone project, she said "that inspired me to do more...You get to put more of yourself into it than if you were just doing math problems." Estelle also spoke of wanting to be creative in classes:

Even though we're all college students, we want to be creative, we want to have fun. In comparing Southeast and [the state university], I felt more like I was able

to express my individuality and I was able to express things that interested me and my creativity. I had more of an opportunity to voice that...at Southeast. At [the university], it's strictly academic-driven.

Meaningful connections / interdisciplinarity. Most participants made comments about how they enjoyed assignments and classes that are interdisciplinary or fostered meaningful connections to other topics or their lives. William stated "I like anything that allows me to use knowledge I gained in the classroom for real world applications." Annie said

I like when things tie in to other fields of study. Like if you're in an English class, maybe you could tie in something with Biology. Or if you're in Biology maybe you could cross that with something in History. Things like that. I feel like if it could keep me interested, maybe it could keep the other students interested as well.

When asked to expand on why these interdisciplinary experiences were engaging for her, she explained "It's like a light bulb goes off. You're like, 'Oh I get that now.'" She described tutoring a student and helping her connect the topic of her paper (relationship violence) to violence throughout history. "If you explain something in a subject that the student is familiar with, they're going to be more likely to understand it in this other field of study as well." Felix also brought up particular assignments he did for classes which were personally meaningful for him. In abnormal psychology, he wrote a paper over Abraham Maslow which he was able to relate back to his grandmother and her hierarchy of needs. He spoke about writing an original song for his honors contract music class,

which was “pretty fun,” and about the extra project he did for his honors contract mechanical respiratory ventilation class:

That was pretty hard... Well, [the professor] was like, “Okay, we’re going to write scenarios for the freshman to use when they’re learning mechanical ventilation.” So I was like, “Okay. Cool.”...Everything from cleaning the ventilator to turning it on to running the tests. Everything you need- your initial set up and I had three or four scenarios that went along with it and questions that went with it and then an answer bank at the end of it. So that’s something that I can carry with me for a long time, that I can take with me to medical school to say, “Look, I understand this concept.”

Estelle criticized classes at her university in which “It didn’t really feel like we were having discussion that was relating to us, in context to the greater picture of the class.”

I had a course about mummies- and it was about nationalism and everything over in Europe and how that led to them exhuming all the mummies and taking all the artifacts from the East, but, the thing is, even though it’s such an interesting course, it wasn’t made to connect with us. So in comparing to Southeast where I did feel connected to the work we were doing, what we read, no matter what it was, at [the university] I feel a little bit disconnected. I would suggest that even if the work has a sort of disconnect, *make it connect*. Make sure that whatever you’re teaching, whether high level or creative...that your students get something from it that makes it feel personal.

Student-directed projects. When asked about topic selection for projects and assignments, most participants said they enjoyed having some power over the topic.

William said he does not like group work because he likes having his "fate in [his] own hands." Other participants said they preferred to be assigned a topic because narrowing down a choice could be overwhelming.

Kylie was one of the participants who prefer the topic to be assigned: "If I get the choice to pick, I'll overthink it and it takes me forever to finally just decide on one." She continued to say "if I'm assigned one, then I know I have to do it and I immediately can gain ideas about how I'm going to organize it. My brain gets scattered otherwise." Jillian said "If you're really going to challenge somebody, it's better if you say 'Here, see what you can do with this.'" Vaughn simply stated "I don't like selecting my own topics."

When asked why, he responded by saying

I've always liked, "Okay, here's what I want you to do." And then I do it. I think that's why it took me so long to choose my capstone topic because there's 557 ideas in my head that I would like to do but I can't pick one. And then [an honors faculty] suggested one and I was like, "Oh, I want to do that." So we did it....I get very easily overwhelmed ...Oh! I could write about this. Or that! Or that!" Like a kid in a candy store.

William is in the middle ground, saying he likes some guidance but some flexibility. For example, in English, it can be difficult to select essay topics because there are so many he could turn into good papers. He discussed his calculus honors contract course assignment:

I got to basically choose what I wanted to do, but he made the project for me, using calculus to calculate radioactive half-lives in Chernobyl. It was pretty interesting.... We actually did a thing in class that was about bioavailability as far as what medicine is distributed to patients and how it is tremendously better than any other form, and that got me thinking about how you could use similar equations in different applications and I asked him about radioactive half-lives and if I could use logarithms to do that, and he said yes, so I decided that's what I wanted to do.

Emma preferred to select her topic because “you get to put more of yourself into it. And I think you do better on them, because you enjoy it more.” She said if she’s not interested the topic, she has “a hard time putting a lot of effort into it.”

Honors Courses

One of the biggest topics participants talked about was the honors courses themselves. They discussed the seminar classes and how they were similar or different than the honors contract classes or non-honors classes. They commented on ways the work pushed them out of their “comfort zone” and fostered discovery and growth. And they talked about the work load and difficulty. Some of these themes have been mentioned in other passages. For example, while participants were talking about differences between honors peers and non-honors peers, several of them briefly mentioned the discussion format of the seminar classes because that is what fostered a different relationship with their honors peers. But now, we will take a more in-depth exploration of the effect of the discussion format.

Discussion. Annie, who is going into education, believes discussion in the classroom “is very positive and interesting. And it gets people engaging in the class...and you get to find out each other’s points of views on things.” She says the goal of discussion is not to get students to agree or disagree, but rather, it’s about “listening to another person and accepting what they have to say. It’s disagreeing or agreeing, then moving on.”

Elizabeth said “the seminar was kind of unstructured so we could just talk about what we wanted. So I really liked that.” She continued to comment on the lack of ability to prepare for some discussions: “Sometimes I just went in and wasn’t sure- I didn’t know much about [the topic] beforehand. So I’d say some more supplemental materials maybe [could be helpful].” Iona stated she likes having a “more open” setup: “It helps me to feel free to talk about my opinions...It lets me feel free to talk about things more openly, like controversial things, or things that people don’t generally talk about.” She then spoke about in one of the seminar classes that was studying rites of passage and the class “somehow got stuck on periods for a whole week.” She commented that the experience helped her “be more open to talk about issues that a lot of people are closed off about” and how that will help her in her career as a counselor.

Vaughn said when people ask him what they do in the seminar classes, he answers “We talk.”

This is not class that you just come in and “Okay class, today we’re going to talk about this, this, and this, and now you’re going to go home and do questions on it.” [The faculty are] just going to flat out ask you, “What do you think about

this?"...So I think one of the benefits is that "non-traditional" lecture style that we get to interact and voice opinions and not just be told, "This is what you should think."...I wish more classes were structured like that. I think [my previous major] would've been more interesting for some of these kids if [the instructor] didn't just sit up there and lecture in his monotone language that he uses.

Sophia also mentioned that the discussion format of the class was more interesting than "a normal class where you take notes on lectures and just go through Power Points." She continued that "I really enjoyed listening to everyone's answers. And even though it was a small class, there was a lot of diversity within the class and that really made it enjoyable." When asked what she meant by "diversity," she answered, "People that had different opinions and were from different backgrounds and some people were older than others and some had families and stuff like that." She commented that the discussion format also pushed her to grow because, as she said, "I don't like talking" because of shyness. "But it really helped me overcome a little bit of that but I'm still working on it." Becka had the same experience. She said when she started the program seminars, she was "nervous because we had to speak into the microphones" and she had "never been challenged to do that, not even in high school." She spoke about how her high school teachers did not force her to speak in class because they knew how uncomfortable it made her. She said "it kind of broke me out of that shell slowly. I'm still nervous, but it's slowly making me come out of it."

William used the phrase "student-driven" to describe the honors seminars. When asked to expand on that, he responded

The instructors would typically have like sort of a game plan, I guess guidelines, that they would come into class with as to what they want to talk about, and then they might give a little bit of information and then ask for student feedback and what they think of that. And then from there a lot of times students would sort of branch off into their own conversations going back and forth giving their own opinions. Sometimes it would be fifteen-twenty minutes of discussion just from one little piece that the instructor gave.

When asked what the effect of that was, he answered “It was more engaging, yeah. It makes you think more critically instead of sitting there listening to what the instructor is going to say for the next hour, you know?” Jillian also commented on the flipped speaking role of these classes, where students sometimes spoke more than the faculty: “I really enjoy the classes....I enjoy the openness of them. I feel like I can freely speak what I think, and that it’s okay, and I love that.” She said other classes “are not quite as open. And in some you’re not the speaker at all, you know, at any point. It’s just the teacher.”

Complex perspectives. Gina voiced the frustration of occasionally feeling like other students were not listening or understanding what she was saying, or that she could not “explain it well enough.” She continued to say

I do feel like we as a class were able to communicate well, and we did listen to each other, and we did respect each other, and we all had different views. And it’s good to see somebody else’s perspectives because you might not ever think that way and then you hear them and how they think and what they feel and you’re

like “Oh yeah. Wait a second. That makes sense too.” So it’s always good to hear somebody else’s opinion.

Lydia discussed how the discussions “where there’s not necessarily right and wrong answers, [but rather a] matter of interpretation and how you view things” can change students’ minds:

I find in those types of discussions, you can go in with your mindset on a certain stance, and then you can listen to somebody else, and you can start to open up to a whole other viewpoint. And I really like that because there’s been so many things that we’ve discussed...[where] I could feel certain ways on things and somebody could be like, “Well this is how I view it” and I’m like “That totally makes sense! I can completely see where you’re coming from” and it’s opened my mind up.

Kylie also brought up honors assignments that exposed her to new perspectives. She said she enjoyed the section on the juvenile justice system in America: “That was probably my favorite because I had so many different opinions on that. I mean so many people had different opinions.” She said she “got really locked into” the topic. She also brought up the text for one of the seminars and how the information covered in the class affected her:

I liked that, just in that one class, I got a completely different perspective on the book we were reading [*A People’s History of the United States* by Howard Zinn]; I was taught completely different throughout elementary school history classes about the past of America, and it just changed my entire perspective on everything. And to me, that was really interesting, and I don’t like to read a lot of

books, but that was one book that I really was interested in and made me want to read and write about it.

She said she enjoyed that the faculty gave the class “more to look at, and [we didn’t] have to just focus on one solid idea. We can gain a perspective of our own and look at it from different directions instead of one specific way.”

Marie spoke on several themes when answering the question of what were the benefits and positive experiences of being in the honors program. She said

I don’t have enough time in the day to tell you how much the honors program impacted me positively. It led me to meet some of the most amazing people, listen to some of the most valuable stories, learn treasured lessons, and experience things I wouldn’t have gotten to experience otherwise. Because of the way the honors program is set up, you’re surrounded by people with differing views than you. These people come from different backgrounds and locations and etc. etc. etc. When you put a bunch of carrots in a pot of chicken broth, it’s going to taste pretty bland. But when you get more vegetables in it and maybe even some spices and meats, it’s going to increase in flavor and be delicious. This is exactly how the honors program works. Experiencing life through one set of eyes isn’t enough-- experiencing life through countless eyes is where the true knowledge of life comes from. Not only that, but the work required of you as an honors student is much more, and harder, than the work required of regular students....The substantial academic things I learned at Southeast were through the honors program and I could not be more thankful...I like hands-on things. I like things

that can be taught outside of the classroom as well as in it. I like being able to discuss things in class and have a sense of openness with my classmates and professors. The honors program definitely encourages and accomplishes these things. I also like English and to write, and with the way the program is set up, many of the discussion boards and blog posts revolved around writing, even some leaned toward creative writing. Those are also the classes I enjoy the most--the ones that embody creativity as well as knowledge. The honors program was exceptional for that.

Honors Work

When participants discussed the work and experiences they had in the honors program, a recurring theme was they felt out of their “comfort zone,” that they discovered new aspects of themselves and their communities, and they grew and developed as people and students.

Out of comfort zone. Emma described how the ITV format and other characteristics of the honors courses were new experiences that she found to be beneficial:

You’re communicating a lot, and you’re sharing ideas, and I just really enjoyed it. And I think that everybody should at least consider [being in a seminar], because it is beneficial, and you get to meet new people. And you do have to get out of your comfort zone, especially with talking over the mic. That was one thing that was like, “Oh, my gosh, I have to press the button and talk.” ...And it’s not just your class. It’s people you don’t know. Especially at first, you don’t know

anybody from the other campus. So it's stressful. But it gets you out of your comfort zone, and it's beneficial for later on in life, and doing that kind of stuff.

Nora spoke about how, at times, she struggled to connect to the course material in the Appalachian seminar because there were "different value conflicts there that made it hard," since she was an outsider and not originally from the area: "Everybody else had much more common experiences with each other that were based on how they were raised and grew up here." Most participants did not mention a struggle to connect to the materials, but they did echo the idea of finding themselves in new territory through the coursework. For example, Gina said the philosophy seminar was her favorite, even though it was sometimes hard to think about the ideas being covered:

It made you really, really think. Sometimes I didn't even want to think about the questions or the quotes or the thing that we were given because I was like, "That hurts my brain" [laughter]....I don't want to think that hard about something, but then when you start to thinking about it, and connect it yourself and connect it to life, it gets really deep. Some of these philosophers were so on point about what they were saying and if you aren't made to think about that, you are never going to think about that on a daily basis. So the fact that we had a whole class revolving around just different thoughts was just amazing to me. And the fact that we could just discuss what it meant to each one of us and that each one of us is different-- it was just really fun. That was probably my favorite honors course.

Danielle spoke at length about how the honors program prepared her for upper level classes when she transferred by helping her develop her thinking and communication skills:

Academically, it was a really good decision. I've tried for years to find the language to describe exactly what the honors program does and now that I'm in the upper division, I think I can describe it. What the honors program did for me was to prepare for the upper division and for higher education in general. In the honors program, you have some of the best students. In a regular classroom environment, the ratio of students who actually want to be there and actually want to learn, and students who are just there because they need a credit or don't want to be there at all, is very uneven and what that does, in my experience, is that it leads to the students who *do* want to be there to dominate classroom discussion, to develop their own ideas, but very rarely *beyond* their own ideas because we don't necessarily have other students to bounce off of. Even in my literature classes, where there's not always a right or wrong answer, it was mainly me talking through class with at least 17, 18 other students sitting there listening, and that is what it is. And in the honors program, you have several students who *do* want to be there, who *do* want to get an education, and who *do* want to do something with that education. All of the honors students that I've kept in touch with...we want our education and we want to do something good with that education. Almost all of us just want to help people. So you have people [in that class] who know what they want and who know that they want to do something good...and we all have our own ideas and we all have our own way of expressing ourselves, but now we

also have *other minds* to bounce off of and we have *other* perspectives to kind of hitch our perspectives to and kind of grow that into a whole different honors “think cloud.” It was really fun and really refreshing to have several other people from several different campuses fighting for the microphone and fighting for the opportunity to answer a question, and to bring their own stories and their own ideas and their own viewpoints in. You don’t necessarily get that in just regular everyday classes, but that is exactly what the upper division is. Having that honors experience, I was able to go into three- and four-hundred level classes and know what to expect and know how to have an academic discussion without getting into a “I’m right and you’re wrong” type of discussion.

Felix spoke about how the extracurricular activities in the honors program teaches students new ways of thinking about other people:

It gets you out of your comfort zone. As much as people don’t want to be out of their comfort zone, it’s healthy. You got people from Wisconsin and Russia- you meet all these different people and they all act different ways so you can be yourself but at the same time, you kind of watch what you say and stuff like that. So you get to figure out people a little bit better. Not even just those people, but people as a whole.

William also spoke about the experiences in the honors programs helping him develop thinking skills and opening his perspectives, and how that will help him in future endeavors:

I think it really was a great experience. I feel like it expanded my mental horizons. It helped me develop more critical thinking skill than I already had and sort of expanded my worldview in a way that I don't think any other class could've. You hear a lot of perspectives from other students and faculty and I think being able to hear those and sort of assimilate them into what you already know is very helpful, especially in moving forward into other classes or into the workforce or anywhere.

Annie spoke about how much she enjoyed the philosophy seminar: "I never had a philosophy class before and didn't really know much about philosophy...so it was really interesting. We had this really cool textbook...and I liked the discussions we had." She continued to say "It really opened my mind-- it was like unlocking a door in your brain. I was like 'Wow. There's so much stuff.'" In speaking about an encaustic painting workshop and class topics of music and art and "everything that you would not normally find in a normal classroom setting," she felt she had the opportunity to "do a lot of things that I would never have learned about." She figured the "instructors dug deep to find these things," which she "really appreciated." Annie then explained

It felt like learning these things altered my thought process in a very positive way. I can pick things apart more. I can dive deeper into things, ideas, thoughts. I'm more likely to do research now than I was before to find answers, like I want to know more answers than I did before the program....Just that it was really fun and at times, it was hard. But I would 100% do it all over again and I have told many students that they need to do it, because it's fun and it's not scary.

Gina also mentioned the program got her out of her “comfort zone.” As she was the fifth or sixth participant to use that phrase, I asked her to expand upon what she meant. She spoke about growing as people and opening up about very personal topics:

The one word: growth. If you do not take a chance or take a risk or step outside of your box, your comfort zone, ever in your life, you are never going to grow as an individual-- period. If you are not, if you don't talk to people and you don't open up, and express yourself or get any kind of feedback, then you cannot grow. I think it's very important to step out of the box and take risk in life. I am all about it because I feel like, if you don't take risk, then you don't get rewarded.... So yeah, I think that the class helps that and I feel like, it being a smaller class, that allows people to feel comfortable enough with everybody to say, “You know what? I can open up. I can tell one of my life stories. I can tell a story about how I was abused when I was younger and people aren't going to judge me. These people love me-- these people are trustworthy.” And I think that's good. It allows people to open up and really step out of that comfort zone to do so.

Sophia also talked about how an assignment in the philosophy seminar made her discover more about herself:

I liked writing the paper about what my outlook on life was. Because I thought that was really personal, and I liked doing that because it made me realize really what I thought that my purpose was, and that helped me a lot.

Becka spoke about how the honors program made her “a better student.” She said having the extra work made her have to focus and complete her work because “being in a

program like this makes you feel you really need to do it because you have a certain GPA you have to keep to stay in the program. So, grade-wise, it's helped me." She continued to say that "It's helped me want to be better. It's helped me better myself even though sometimes it was hard." Becka then spoke how much she enjoyed the Appalachian studies seminar because she had lived in this region her whole life and "didn't know how much history is behind one place. I like being around the people and hearing their stories."

Lydia spoke about her struggles with anxiety and how experiences through the honors program is helping her face and overcome that by presenting at conference and public events:

It's helped me get out of my comfort zone I think. I've always had a lot of anxiety, and I'm trying to do better and I'm trying to challenge myself to open up more and this has really helped me a lot. I've made new friends, I've learned a lot. I've got to do and experience things that I wouldn't have got to experience before, learned new things like going to the SRHC [Southern Regional Honors Council conference] last year-- I got to hear other students present over all kinds of different topics and it was really great.

When asked to explain what she meant about getting out of her "comfort zone," Lydia continued:

I've wanted to participate more in the things that we do. Normally, I've always been more of a spectator and I never really liked to participate in things. My anxiety kept me from doing a lot of things in college-- I didn't really like to talk

much in class. I didn't really like to participate in things where I would have to do a lot of speaking, but in our ITV classes, in our honors seminar classes, it's required that you have to do speaking and [participate] in the discussion. I just feel like I've done a lot of personal growth-- it's helped me do all that. And I would've never saw myself as really wanting to present at the conference and I'm actually doing that at the end of this month and if I look back to when I first started college, it's just, it's astounding at the growth that I've done. [Reading poems at two public readings] were big steps too. I think this one is a little bit bigger because these are students from all over the southern region of the United States. This one is a little more intimidating to me. I'm really nervous about this one, but I think this'll be a big personal victory for me.

In a post-interview communication, she spoke about the experience of presenting at the SRHC conference:

I presented both to have the experience and to have a victory over my personal struggles with anxiety and depression. Although I was *way* out of my comfort zone, afterward I felt empowered. I was proud of myself. It was exciting and something I definitely would like to do again.

Nora spoke about how her motivation to join the program was as "another opportunity for me to stretch and grow" instead of being concerned with how it would look on transcripts and applications:

But I have a tendency to think that way anyway. It's kind of like getting a new job. You hopefully are not thinking about how this is going to look in the future,

but is it actually an opportunity where you're going to grow as a person because there may be a situation in the future where it doesn't matter on paper what you did, but what you can do for yourself. I think that probably, in that way, [the honors program] benefited me the most...because I did grow....And I did feel if I had gone into that class and I felt like I wasn't growing and I wasn't learning, then I would've just been out of here....And I don't think that I would've been willing to go an alternative route [changing career goals] if I hadn't have had that experience going through the honors program....I also probably wouldn't have felt as okay with making the decision that I wanted to do something a little bit different with my life if I hadn't have had that honors program because I wouldn't have felt as adventurous. I'm not really sure how to put that. I probably wouldn't have been open to taking a different path.

Emma spoke about how some of the topics in the philosophy class, particularly those that intersected with religion, could be uncomfortable to discuss but that it is a good skill for students to develop:

We went over some pretty big topics. You know, "where do we come from?" and just all this stuff that in a normal class, you probably wouldn't go over. So I enjoyed having the opportunity to see someone else's viewpoint. I think it's a big thing when you can...have a conversation with somebody about a big topic like that- about religion, or anything like that- and have them really pick your brain to see why you think that way....So even though some of the topics may feel uncomfortable or serious, or somebody else in the class might think differently than you, it's a good experience, because that's how the world is. When you get

out in the real world, you're not going to have everybody who believes exactly the way you do. And you kind of have to learn how to open yourself up to saying, "Okay, well, I see where you're coming from." So that was very beneficial....At my house, church is a big deal. My grandfather, he pastored for thirty years. I have two uncles who are pastors. My mom teaches. So I've known nothing but that. So for me to get into a class, and it's like, well, somebody else doesn't believe in God; they believe in something else. At first, it is uncomfortable, because you're like, "Oh, I've never had somebody, you know, *not* agree with me," if that makes sense. But just being able to say, "I see where you're coming from, but this is what I think, too," and to still be able to be cordial to each other, and then to not be, you know, this big blown-up thing, prepared me for other classes that I've had since then, where you kind of have to give your viewpoint on some serious stuff, too.

This common experience of being uncomfortable or in new territory was addressed again and again. And each time, participants said in the end it was worthwhile discomfort, that they learned something about themselves, others, or the world, that they refined some skill or ability, or that it opened up their worldview and perspective about the topic. These were the activities, discussions, and topics that participants spoke most at-length about, and several of them expressed they experienced a fundamental change or growth.

One participant, Nora, mentioned feeling like "there was a difference between core values and it affected how people were approaching" the topic being covered in a seminar. When asked to clarify what she meant by a "difference between core values,"

she discussed coming from a different cultural perspective than faculty and other students because she wasn't originally from Appalachia:

I think it was both because if I remember right...[the Appalachian studies topics were] approached much more familial-y and it was easy for people who had lived here to connect to it. I remember one assignment in particular we had to do family trees. And I know that seems simple but it bothered me because I had to sit there and think about that and then I also had to display it and then give a presentation on it and it was- there is a huge difference for me. While I have very strong family values, I don't really think about it in the sense that my family is necessarily my "family" family. I'm more of, you know, who comes into my life, that's my family.

Difficulty of workload. When asked about the work they did for their honors classes, participants mostly talked about assignments they liked and remembered, or the specific ways they made their regular classes into honors contract classes. Lydia spoke about enjoying the variety of assignments in the honors classes. She said

I think I consider the quality of my honors class work to be higher- well, I don't want to say higher because that makes it sound like I'm slacking on my work that's not for my honors classes. I don't mean it that way I just- it's kind of different. The honors class homework doesn't always follow like a typical class type homework if that makes sense. In some classes you write a lot of essays, in some classes you have a lot of chapter homework questions, and with our honors seminar classes, it's a lot of different things and I really like that because it's not a

monotonous thing of “Well we’re going to read this and we’re going to do this and we’re going to answer questions” and [the honors classes] don’t do that over and over and over, and I really like that. It changes it up because it keeps it interesting and I really like that.

One theme participants discussed was if, and in what ways, the work for honors classes was different. Most discussed their aggregate workload, with regular classes, honors seminars, and contract classes. Annie said “The last seminar I took was simultaneously taken with my radiography classes so I had a huge class load but I wanted to finish the honors program.” Jillian started by saying “It’s harder. It’s harder than normal, but it’s worth it. We have to do more work than the other students...But it’s worth it to me because I feel like I’ve achieved something more than the...average student.” She continued to say

It’s going to pay off in the long run, like, on these college applications and especially when it’s time for resumes and jobs I think that’s when it’s really going to show...I think the time management part of it was a little difficult. I wish I could’ve started [in the program] earlier...because I just started last term which means I have to take three honors classes this term to complete it. I’m a stubborn person so I want to complete it...If I’d have known and joined earlier maybe that would’ve helped but yeah, having to do it all piled in one bit, it’s a little stressing- - that’s a good word. It’s a little bit stressing.

Elizabeth also discuss the workload of turning some of her classes into honors contract classes: “I’d say for the contract classes it was pretty hard to try to do extra work

in the classes because there was already kind of a big load.” Emma also spoke about contract classes and time management:

I remember being very stressed out during that time, because it was finals anyways, so I was, like, panicked. And I had waited until the end of the semester, and that’s what will get you. If you’re going to do it, you have to start at the beginning.

Gina spoke about the stress of time management and workload and having to prioritize assignments:

Sometimes I did feel a little- not that there was ever too much work for me- but sometimes I felt like there was a lot of busy work and I had other classes. Because I always took a full load. I had other classes that I had tons of stuff to study for, papers to write, reports to do, tests to take, and sometimes I felt like there was a little too much busy work....And so sometimes I would get overwhelmed with that and I would shove it to the side and be like “Okay. I’ll do that when I have a second because I need to do this first because it’s more important.” And that sometimes got to me. Because some of [the assignments], I didn’t always understand the reasoning...And I’m sure you all had your reasonings as to why you all gave us the assignments, but part of me, with some of them- and there’s none I can think of in specific- but I was like, “Why? What’s the point in this?” You know? So that. And really, there wasn’t too many negative sides of the class in itself. I mean, I enjoyed the classes--that’s why I kept taking them.

Nora spoke about how she started taking the fourth seminar class and realized she had to drop “because of course load. But I didn’t need the extra seminar. I was taking it because I wanted to be there, but then I couldn’t balance it.” And she then spoke about time management and prioritizing assignments because of the increased workload:

It turned into a little bit more of a crunch time for me and I had trouble with some of the assignments based on, sometimes you have to prioritize, and it wasn’t like I was putting off large projects for our classes-- it was usually the little stuff that fell between the cracks because I had other bigger things for my traditional classes which were much less lenient as far as how this is going to affect my final grade.

And she spoke about a variation of work for the seminars. She said there was one seminar that she “didn’t like” and she “didn’t do as much for that class.” However, she continued to describe that that seminar “was good for me in that I grew and became more accepting.”

Felix had the unique experience of beginning the program while finishing his AA and AS degrees, and then finishing the program requirements while earning his AAS degree. The honors program seminar classes are general education classes, and he had already taken all those requirements while earning his first two degrees. That left him to find a way to fit honors program requirements in while fulling his allied health program course track, which left little room for extra courses or extracurricular activities because of the strict sequencing of classes. When asked to talk about that challenge he responded with

Well, I guess it all just comes down to how much do you really want it? The [respiratory program] coursework is, it's everyday- quizzes and tests every day. To be honest, I wish I had done those three [contract honors] classes while I was in respiratory-- pharmacology, and the fundamentals, and stuff like that to help better understand, because that forces you...to go above and beyond, and then once you're so used to going above and beyond, you just kind of try to stick with it. I'm not saying my above and beyond is more than anybody else's above and beyond...but it gives you a good work ethic, you know. It's kind of like having a job, like, you *have* to do this....Once you get used to having big workloads all the time, you just get used to the extra, which for me, the extra is beneficial. So you're balancing everything. It wasn't too bad, which [the faculty] all made it easy to balance. [They] make it a very efficient program.

When asked to discuss his decision to take his final honors seminar class in the summer *after* he graduates with his third degree and before he transfers, he said "Yeah, of course. You can't halfway put a car together and try to start it. It just doesn't work that way. For someone to come into the honors program and just stop, that don't make any sense." He commented that because of this situation and being on SAP (Satisfactory Academic Progress) appeal because he already had so many credit hours, he was paying out of pocket for honors program classes. He said "at the moment, \$500 is hard to come by...I can't really afford that right now" but he stressed that "it's well worth the education...It's well worth it."

Honors contract classes. Emma described doing one of her math courses as an honors contract and how that connects to her career goals. She was able to teach two

lessons for the class. She said “I really enjoyed it.” She described how another professor was in the back of the room observing her as she led the class in a review. She said

That made me even more nervous, because I was like, [the professor] is going to think I’m stupid. It was just a review, though, for a test, and everybody just seemed to do well, and so, I felt a little better that they knew what I was talking about. And then she let me teach an entire lesson. And I just enjoyed it; I really liked it.

She spoke about how it was a frustrating experience because of her professor putting off the days that she would be able to teach until the end of the course, but she stressed the experience was good for her:

And, so, I went through the book, because one thing with it was, I don’t want to be that teacher that just spews information. Like, I want, if somebody’s like, “Well, how did they get that?” I want to be able to explain....So I went through all the examples, and made sure that I knew what was going on. Because that makes a big difference; I don’t want to just regurgitate it and then hope that somebody understands....I mean, it made me feel good that they understood.

Extracurricular Activities

One of the topics participants were asked about were the extracurricular activities they attended. In the seminar classes, there are usually two required activities (such as touring a nearby university campus and participating in a workshop connected to the seminar curriculum). Since seminar classes are open to students who are *not* in the honors program, some of the peer interactions discussed might be with honors peers and some

might be students who are not in the program, though they are in the seminar. Also, each year there are additional extracurricular activities that are optional, or may be offered as extra credit. These additional extracurricular events can be attended by program students not in the current seminar and even alumni who are no longer at SKCTC.

Time conflicts. One of the complications that arises with the extracurricular activities is conflicts with students' schedules and obligations. Most students work and/or family obligations which can make attending a day-long event difficult, let alone an out-of-state conference for multiple days. Since the seminar classes are Monday and Wednesday afternoons, most required events are scheduled on Friday or Saturday to accommodate as many students as possible.

Danielle spoke about her experience with scheduling conflicts when she said she could not attend many events because she was working as a tutor at that time. Emma echoed how her work schedule prevented her from attending many events: "I worked retail, so it was, like- you know, you work weekends mostly, and evenings, so it's kind of hard for me."

Professional development opportunity. Jillian expressed the feeling that the extracurricular activities "are really positive" and being able to "put them on résumés and college applications will benefit as well." Marie described her attendance at a conference in Georgia as "amazing!" She also noted that through these events, students were "introduced to new schools and potential transfer opportunities, [and] presentations, which prepare you for professional presentations." Iona said the activities "were really useful" and then noted

I'm probably the only junior in the Social Work Program who has been to a conference and knows kind of what to do and how to dress, what to expect, and things like that. So I think the experiences were really good for things like that...Honors helped me get those experiences and know how to act at a conference. Because I'm going to one next week and everyone's kind of freaked out, but I'm not.

Nora spoke about how her time in the honors program changed her career path, specifically how the extracurricular trips and conferences helped her pin down her career goals. She described that the program helped her start looking at herself "more holistically." She said

The tendency with certain paths of education, it sort of compartmentalizes certain ideas because that's how classes work...that's how our education is focused. So I never really thought about how I could include all of things I was good at and I liked doing into one career path because it just was not the way that I was thinking about things....I know that I can bring my skills and my hobbies and things that I like into one thing and...the education stopped being the end goal, which was I think, probably where that anxiety came from because it stopped being a feeling like this is the be-all-end-all-- if you get your degree in this field, this is where you're going to work....It was kind of revolutionary for me going forward....The one conference we went to in Charleston- there's a school down there that offers a program, one of the community colleges has a program for historical preservation....It seems like the best thing for me-- it's what I'm interested in. I've always been passionate about preservation because it's a

connection to your past that is way more grounding than a lot of other ways....The first [extracurricular event] I went to was the Idea Festival and it was really helpful- it was probably the turning point when I started to think of my career differently because they had a lot of examples of people who were trained in humanities and various things who were artists but they did a lot of different things....They did something different that I had not seen before and so then it opened up my mind to other opportunities and possibilities and that was really helpful, although it didn't really come into fruition until much later. Partners in the Parks was a really good experience for me but I feel like probably what I got from that is not what you'd expect-- it was much more personal....I have a tendency to put off making a decision about something until the very last minute and I was at kind of one of those points where I was like "Okay! You got to make your decision!" And I had, for months ahead of time, I kept thinking about this one place in particular in Cade's Cove and we went there as one of the activities that we went to while we were there. At the time, I thought that I was going to do environmental science and go that route because I wanted to do something that I felt was giving back. I like science, I can do it, but I realized that I don't like it as much as I thought I did. That was one of the things that I thought I had learned from there because, while I loved what they were doing, I didn't see myself doing what they were doing....But then at the same time, for months, I had been thinking about that place, because I had been there before, several times, and there was something about it that kept drawing me back and I kept thinking about it...I had it in dreams and things like that. And we went there and I remember one of

the buildings, going in and looking at the stairs. And, the stairs were completely not what I had remembered, and while that seems kind of crazy, they were small, they were narrow, they were steep. They were practically like climbing a ladder made of wood and it hit me that *that* was what was important to me. Not that literally, but that-- preserving those things that are not like that anymore. It's one of the ways that we can connect to that again. In much more of a real way because if someone is writing something about going up the stairs a hundred years ago, it's not the same to *see* the stairs from a hundred years ago.

Memorable events. When asked about the extracurricular activities, most participants spoke about the ones they attended and enjoyed. Danielle said

The one I did attend was when we came to Cumberland and the guy with the hawks came. That was a really fun thing...[The faculty] took [another student] and I to the Southeastern Regional Honors Conference in spring 2014. It was Savannah, Georgia and we're still talking about it. Just every once in a while, "Do you remember when we went to Georgia?"

Becka also spoke of going to a regional conference:

I loved being there because we got to view all these other colleges and stuff but we also had fun doing what we did, like, the Florida trip was awesome. I loved it. Not [just] because we got to do things, but we also get to learn about different things. One of them, I went into one of the [presentations] they had...and the girl was talking about her science program thing she's doing with rats.... I thought that was cool. It makes me want to do research sometimes.

Annie attended the Idea Festival in Louisville twice with the program. She said, “I absolutely loved it. It was one of the best trips I’ve been on. That was the first time I’d ever been to Louisville, Kentucky, which was also fun because I’d never got to experience it before.” When asked, she elaborated with “Just getting to hear all the speakers was really interesting and getting to meet all of them afterward was really fun. It was like watching ten TED Talks and I thought ‘This is so cool!’” Danielle, looking back on her trip to a regional conference with the program said “I really regret now that I didn’t pay enough attention or- maybe it wasn’t attention- I regret that I didn’t realize at that time how important conferences are to the rest of your academic career.” She continued

And [the faculty] was very nice and didn’t pressure me [to present] and I just let it go at that, and I wish now that I would’ve gone ahead and done it then. I’m a senior and about to graduate and I only just now did my very first academic conference. So I regret that I didn’t realize at the time how important that was, not only just for a CV but for just to get a very well-rounded academic experience. From an observational standpoint, it was absolutely fascinating. Just seeing all of these other really bright, scholarly minds comes together....It was really cool.

About the extracurricular events, Estelle said “Those were always fun, where we would like eat and have our mask painting-- which was always my favorite because we identified different parts about ourselves that we hadn’t seen before in a creative way.” Then, when discussing the campus tour of the University of Pikeville, she said “I remember that. That was fun!” and she continued on to discuss the UPike professor:

She gave us a tour and showed us the crazy grave of the ghost of UPike [laughter]. And she gave us the history and we went and visited the Hatfield and McCoy cemetery. And that's always a good time when you go to a cemetery [laughter].

Vaughn also spoke of different events he enjoyed after saying "I loved attending the extracurricular events!" When asked why they were enjoyable, he answered

Because it's never something ordinary. It's always something different. Like, we went to Berea to tour the campus, but we also stopped in whatever that little town was outside and I got some awesome yarn, we got to see the glassblower....The instructors always find something cool for us to do. They have been wonderful and interesting. They're so much fun. I think [the faculty] really try to do something that's engaging and enriching, rather than say, "Oh, we're going to go look at this campus." I attended two conferences. I did the Honors Round Table in Louisville and the SRHC in 2016 in Orlando.

He discussed his anxiety about attending the first conference he went to when he said "I was super freaked out about going to my first session...just going in and sitting somewhere." When asked why, he answered

I don't know. I was just like "I'm going to go in here with a whole bunch of other smart people from honors programs from larger universities and they're going to look at me like I'm stupid," but that goes back to my anxiety. Then [two southeast students also attending the conference] went with me to talk about gay topics and sports anime and black male dating preferences and HBCUs.

When Gina spoke about attending a concert of an international music group, she said “Yeah! That was so fun. I enjoyed that. That was the very first thing that I attended....I loved the music-- it was awesome.” She spoke about going to a regional science museum for an exhibit of polymerized dissected cadavers and other events including a social experiment where students started the day with a paperclip and had to see what they could trade it for:

Yes! We did the body museum! That was really fun. We went to Harlan and met there when they were filming that movie and we did the whole paperclip [exchange] and oh my gosh, that one was crazy....I asked an officer, “Can I trade a paper clip for something?” I really liked the whole music thing. I love music and I thought it was really cool to just sit and enjoy music with each other. But I also liked roaming around Harlan. And I’d never been to Harlan and it scared me and I was like, “Ugh! Where I am at?” I didn’t have service- nothing. But I really enjoyed roaming around with a paperclip trying to talk and interact with people....I did enjoy our out-of-class activities.

Felix also spoke of the paperclip exchange experiment and said it was “real fun....That was awesome.” He spoke about being exposed to professional writers at a week-long writers’ studio and what that was like:

We get there and we have those authors and writers and artists and I was like, “Oh my god. These people actually know what they’re doing.”... These are people that are very well-established in doing what they do, you know.... There was a lot of

things taken home from that. So that was real fun, plus I'd never been in a dorm either so that was real cool.

And when the subject of his attendance at a Partners in the Parks event (through NCHC) with honors students from all over the country in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, he said, "Oh you better set aside another hour for that. That was the highlight of my year....The Smokies, man that was a complete detachment from society. That was nice." He spoke at length at how it was "real awkward" for him when first meeting students and faculty from all over the country, but he enjoyed himself, so much so that a photo of one scenic overlook from the trip was still the wallpaper on his laptop, nearly two years later. He spoke about the eight-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail: "Hiking to Charlie's Bunion--that was awesome. That was cooler than any hike that I went on since then....way cooler." He spoke about bonding with the other students and faculty and how doing the volunteer work during that Partners in the Parks week inspired him to become a volunteer at a national park where he lives:

I've been volunteering there ever since....But you know if I hadn't been there and gotten inspired to do that stuff through the honors program, well I wouldn't have been volunteering there. That's really the first time I've even hiked there....Yeah, [lived next to the park my whole life], hardly ever been there. And now I've hiked every trail that place has to offer.

Other participants also spoke about events that they enjoyed. William expressed "Those [trips] were really fun" and "I didn't get to go on as many trips as I would've liked." When discussing a tour to Berea he attended, he said, "We went to a glassblower

shop. That was really interesting- the Rupert's Drop. I ended up going home and doing a lot of research on those!" Emma spoke favorably about the events she could attend. She said "I enjoyed that we did get to meet outside of class. It makes it more interesting." She described a workshop with a graphic novelist by saying

That actually was really, really fun. I still have [my drawing]...hanging up on the fridge at the house. Nobody really understands it. My stepdad was like, "I don't know what it's supposed to mean." I was like, "Well, you just had to be there."

Connection to capstone. Estelle discussed how an extracurricular opportunity offered through the honors program connected to her capstone project. She was awarded a scholarship from Lincoln Memorial University to attend their literary festival and writers' studio for a week and that developed her capstone project: "[I used] what I wrote during that time and a reflection as my capstone project." William also started his capstone project, which was writing a long piece of fiction (which at the time of interviewing was at 33,000+ words) at that same writing festival a different year. At the time of the interview, Vaughn was planning to present at a regional conference about his capstone project, starting SOGIA (Student Orientation and Gender Identity Alliance). He got involved in SOGIA as his capstone when another student asked if there was an LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) student organization at Southeast, which there was not. Speaking of the experience, he said "Oh it's been awesome. It was an uphill battle 95% of the way...[but] it was fun, trying to figure out the puzzle that was creating a student organization under our current [college] administration." About forthcoming experience of presenting he said, "It's going to be an experience. I don't like talking in front of people." When asked why he wanted to present, he answered

Because I know I'm eventually going to have to talk in front of people. It's inevitable, especially going into nursing....One-on-one is fine, but [it's difficult] when it's a group of people, kind of like in a nursing setting, where you're going to have one patient who you're supposed to be talking to, but you're going to have 4 or 5 family members who are you like, "What does that mean? What is this?" So I need the experience of talking in front of people. And I've just always wanted to present at a conference. I always thought it'd be fun. I might die after we're through [laughter] but I thought it'd always be fun.... Yes, that's one of the anxieties, that I'm going to get up there and forget. That's like, I'm really good at anatomy, but sometimes when [the professor] asks questions, I don't know what it is-- I can draw you a chemical formula, but I can't tell you what the name of that is. So I think it's more of the perception of me being not as intelligent as I am, and I think it all goes back to my father calling me stupid.

Campus tours. When discussing the extracurricular events, participants spoke about the campus visits, which the seminars take at least once a semester to surrounding colleges and universities. Gina said "I did enjoy seeing the colleges and hearing about them. Honestly...it was just overwhelming sometimes because I was like 'I don't know. There's so much information!' you know?" Lydia described the campus tours as "beneficial." She said "students may not always get a chance to visit other campuses, but through the honors program going and getting to tour these campuses is something that's really helped -- you can go and see firsthand what they offer." Emma spoke about the tour she took to the school she would end up transferring to after graduating Southeast:

I actually really enjoyed the town, and I was like, "Oh, I might want to go here." I really enjoyed it. And I thought it was beneficial to go and to look at other colleges' honors programs, and to know that you can move on and you don't have to just stop honors there, you can actually do it somewhere else.

Felix also decided where to transfer after a campus tour with the honors program: "We went to ETSU, made a visit there, and that's actually what got me interested."

Transfer

Most alumni transferred after their time at Southeast, and most of those still in the program have clear intention to transfer, though it might be unclear where. Felix is planning to transfer to one of the schools he experienced on an honor program campus tour. He said one appeal to transferring there is their bachelor's degree for his program is 100% online. William is finishing an AA and AS degree and is "looking for a job currently as I'm trying to decide what I'm going to do next." He is looking at pharmacy schools out-of-state but has not yet decided. Jillian stated, "I absolutely want to transfer." She is still deciding which medical field to study, and she expressed the concern of finances: "I'm hoping and praying and begging for a scholarship."

Iona had to change her transfer destination because, while she was in the process of registering, the director of the program she was going into at the transfer college was shot and killed, and the program was shut down, leaving Iona to transfer to a different university. About her new school, she is satisfied with her academic program experiences, but overall said "these teachers are so mean compared to Southeast. They're not as friendly." She told of running into another Southeast honors student who

transferred to that university and that the two of them “hugged each other and cried.” Estelle transferred to a Kentucky state university and joined their honors program. She discussed her plans after her bachelor’s, ultimately wanting to get her master’s after beginning in the career field, and then eventually a doctorate. When speaking about her transfer experience, she said her time in the Southeast honors program prepared her for her transfer experience:

It led me to honors at [the university]. I don’t think I would’ve joined the honors program [here] had I not been at Southeast. I will say actually I *definitely* wouldn’t have seen the purpose in it. So it motivated me to join...and I actually got scholarships because of it. I got the highest honors scholarship you can get, which is the Presidential scholarship because of my grades and my honors transfer. I also think that by graduating with that it has also added to my résumé. It has also added to my credibility. It makes me feel like I have accomplished something more. So it really gave me a confidence boost when I graduated with honors. And then I was recognized for it in my future education, so it *did* matter, which was the biggest part.

Marie transferred after a semester off because her life was “a little hectic.” About her honors experience, she said “Students that graduated from Southeast’s honors program, at least in my opinion, are more prepared to take on upper division classes at their transferring university.” She also stated that her time in the honors program is helping her since she has transferred:

Because of skills in social justice that I learned through the honors program, I am now being offered internships through [the new college's] sociology department. Likewise, because of the research skills I learned, I'm excelling in my English classes and have professors that believe in me. These are things I owe to the faculty of the Southeast honors program.

In a post-interview message, Sophia, who transferred to a university in Tennessee, wrote that because of her honors seminar classes, she was well-prepared for work at her transfer university. She wrote specifically about the Intro to Contemporary Thought class: "I felt more prepared than other students considering this was my second exposure to the material, versus their first. We discussed Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, and Kant. It was good to already know some of the material." She continued to say "I definitely benefitted from it." At the time of the interview, Sophia was thinking of switching schools, which was an experience multiple study participants went through. About the decision to switch schools, she said

I don't really like my program that I'm in now. So I'm thinking about transferring after this semester and doing the Lindsey Wilson program here at Southeast and getting my Bachelor's in Human Services... I kind of like the classroom setting more here at Southeast where it's smaller and it's more interaction one-on-one with the professor. Instead of just knowing that they're in the class, you actually know them by their name and that's very helpful.

Emma transferred to a state university in Kentucky after graduating Southeast. She said she looked into the university's honors program but decided not to join. She said

I was afraid, where I was going through the program that my course load would get a lot harder, so I just figured I'd not join....When we took the tour at [the university], I went and I was really interested in it. A lot of the classes that they offered I thought were really interesting. But I was worried...about taking on too much....I didn't want to have to, like, drop it after I'd got into it.

She ended up transferring to a college that was closer to home because of a cancer diagnosis in the family. About that experience, she said, "So, I came back home. I mean, I enjoyed [the university]; I liked their program. I did well [there]. But, I just came home for, you know, family." She described herself as an "independent person" and that she has a "very, very tight-knit family," and her moving two hours away to the university was a "big change." When asked to elaborate on that, she spoke at length of the common experience Appalachian students can face when they have a close family but their educational or employment opportunities require relocating hours away:

I guess, when I was at home...if I was dealing with anything, my mom was there....It was just that reassurance. I felt comfort, like, she's here if anything's going wrong. But then when you move away, it's kind of...everything- you're doing it on your own. She acted okay [when I moved away]. She acted fine. Even before her diagnosis, I was kind of considering going home. I just wasn't happy, being that far away, which was hard for me. It was more of a pride thing. Because I was like, "Everybody else can do it, so why can't I leave home? I should be able to do it." But I had been talking to her before she told me that she had cancer. She never swayed me one way or the other. She was like, "Well, you know, just think about it; it's your decision-- it's your life." But, then, when I told her I was

actually coming home, she was like, "I was so happy! I wanted you to come home, but I didn't want you to come home just because I *wanted you* to come home." Well, I'm a very anxious person. I tend to overanalyze and stress over things that most people probably wouldn't even think about. So, I was constantly having anxiety, and I was constantly stressed out. And I didn't really get out, I guess. I stayed in my dorm on campus all the time. I didn't go out on the weekends. I wasn't, like, the normal college student. So, just kind of sitting in my dorm, constantly not doing things that were fun. That makes a big difference. That doesn't relieve your stress at all....I definitely feel more relaxed since I came back. On some levels. It's hard. I can't be away from my mom, but even living with her is still stressful. It's like you can't win, either way [laughter].

She said after her bachelor's, she will continue on with a master's in her field. Danielle also transferred immediately to a university and decided it was not the right school for her, and transferred to a different college, but for different reasons. She describes her the first school as "a fine institution, but it was not for me." When asked to explain, she said

Okay. Well, first of all, I am distanced enough from it now that I can own about 60-65% of my experience there was entirely my fault. Because I made the mistake of walking into a transfer institution-- and this is something I would tell any transfer student who had the same community college experience I did-- I walked into [the university] packing around the academic ego that I had developed at Southeast and expected everybody to honor. Little understanding that they had absolutely no reason to honor that, because they didn't know me, they didn't know what I was capable of, and honestly they didn't care and they had every

right to not care. It was mainly realizing that outside of Southeast, I was just another student, and at the time my ego could not handle that. Also, there was a lot of unresolved mental health issues with me at the time, and that didn't help. And then the other part- there was a degree of cliquishness there, a little snobbery, and a little academic elitism that I just could not connect to....Because at Southeast I never felt like I was in competition with other students. I never felt like I had to prove that I was smart every time I walked into a room. Now, I will also admit because I *did* have a huge ego at that time, that I just very freely let everyone know that I was smart. If I could meet myself about five years ago, I'd probably punch her in the face. "Just take it down a notch, honey!" But then you also didn't get the sense at Southeast that my instructors were still having to prove to me that they knew what they were doing. And I kind of got a little sense of that at [the university]. And I was just, frankly, unhappy there. So I took a semester off after withdrawing and procrastinated on making another decision for a really long time because I was exhausted at that point....That was my first semester off in a really long time and I was still really unhealthy at that time so just took the opportunity to rest. And then literally at the last minute, I applied to [the college]....And it's a completely different experience but that's probably mainly due to that I am thankfully not the person that I used to be. And I tried very hard not to walk into [here] with a sense of entitlement, I guess. I knew that I was walking into someone else's territory and they didn't know me. They didn't know what I was capable of. All they had was a piece of paper saying that I had learned how to walk in this environment under somebody else's tutelage.

After graduating from the college with her bachelor's, she intends to take a summer off before starting grad school. She said she is "suddenly on the fence" about what to study in grad school though:

I used to know exactly what kind of literature I wanted to study, but now being in the upper division, I've experienced so many other different areas of specialty that my brain is growing and my areas of interest are growing and on one hand, that's very frustrating because I used to know exactly what I wanted, but as I said I'm not who I was five, four years ago. So that just means that I am still continuing to grow as a person. So it's good thing.

Annie also transferred after graduating Southeast but then ended up switching schools. She discussed being in an allied health program for one year before she "didn't really like it anymore." About that experience, she said, "I just realized that healthcare was not for me." She spent a year commuting to a university in Virginia, but the commute was "stressful" so she transferred to a university in Kentucky that offers an online bachelor's degree. She then spoke about the different experiences at the Virginia university and the Kentucky university. She said she had a smoother transition from Southeast to the Virginia university than she did from the Virginia university to the Kentucky university, in regards to transcripts, registering, and the like. Her Virginia university classes were "small" and "similar" to Southeast's classes, but one difference was the increased diversity at the Virginia university. She said

I would meet someone from California, Florida, New York. And they're not used to our Appalachian culture here. So it was a culture shock for them to move here

to go to school and it was a little bit of a shock for me to meet someone from LA or New York and be like, “Well, I guess we’re classmates now.” But it was fun. I had fun, I enjoyed it....I think one of my favorite parts of it were them talking about the different “country” things that they’ve gotten to experience and talking about their accents have changed and they’re picking up on our dialect, they’re trying all these new foods they’ve never had before. Like, there was a guy from Florida who’d never had soup beans before. It was just little things like that that were really fun and I’m just kind of like, “That’s cute!”

Some of the reasons participants could not finish the honors program requirements were conflicts when they got into their technical programs, like the allied health programs. Another reason participants credited with not being able to finish the problem was change in their transfer plans, which Kylie experienced. Even after the honors faculty arranged one seminar class to be an independent study for her, she was unable to take the second seminar. She explained the situation:

American Seminar class overlapped with my other classes so I did it as an independent study. And I would summarize each chapter that we read and write summaries and take notes on all that and I still got to participate in the essays and I still got to come to class once a week.... I had overloads each semester; I’ve been taking at least 20 hours each semester since I’ve been here and I tried to squeeze it in but [the seminar class] just fell right in the same time as one of my other classes and I didn’t join my first year because I intended on transferring after one year, but then I made the decision to stay for the full two years.

Suggestions for Improvement

When participants were asked what the drawbacks and negatives were of being in the honors program, they struggled to think of anything specific. Emma said “really, overall, I didn’t have any bad experiences. I enjoyed it.” Vaughn responded similarly when he answered “Drawbacks of the program? I don’t know. Are there drawbacks of the program?” When I responded with “That’s what I’m asking. Or complications? Or challenges?” his response was

I mean, I think that’s kind of the point. You do the honors program because you *want* to challenge yourself to do better. Like, if I [hadn’t] really wanted to, I wouldn’t have done the honors program and had the extra 20% added to the classes.

When participants *did* pinpoint a challenge they experienced, they were quick to buffer what they were saying by noting it was not a problem actually stemming from how the program was set up. For example, Lydia answered with

I’m really hard on myself as far as my grades. I don’t think it’s really necessarily a drawback of the program. I know that with the program, you’re expected to keep a certain GPA so this probably wouldn’t even really be considered a drawback, but I think being in the program has made me more critical of my grades. I have to make sure I maintain a 4.0. I stress out if I don’t make an A on a test or quiz or something, so I think that’s something-- it’s made me highly aware of all my grades that I make.

For clarification, I asked “Are you saying that if you didn’t have to have the certain GPA for the honors program, you wouldn’t be so stressed about the grades?” she answered with “You know, I honestly think that I would still probably be the same way. I probably would...I can’t really think of any negatives of the program. I think it’s honestly all kind of great.” Iona mentioned that she “go a little stressed out” when trying to finish her contract classes, and she tempered that by saying “But that’s probably my fault because I’m a procrastinator.”

Other examples of this can be seen when Becka answered, “I mean, to me, nothing’s been negative about it. If anything, it’s made me a better student.” Sophia answered the question of what improvements she saw needed made with “Not at all. I think it’s awesome.” When I pushed her by asking “You can’t think of anything we should do better?” she responded with “Not really, no. It’s so different than a traditional class and that’s why everyone likes it so much.”

When I finally asked for “improvements to make” instead of “drawbacks,” “negatives,” or “obstacles,” more participants offered ideas. When they spoke about ways to improve the program, they mentioned getting more students involved and sharing the honors experience, offering more honors classes, having more funds available in the budget, and assisting more with transfer. Some of these topics can be seen when Estelle said “To be honest, I feel like the only drawback was that I didn’t feel like I got enough out of it. I felt like there were too *few* classes.” She continued

I wanted to take more. There was more I wanted to do, but the program is smaller and the funding itself at Southeast is kind of wonky right now. So I feel like the

honors in general, it was kind of harder for us to be able to do everything we wanted. I had wished I'd been able to go on more trips in the future, I wish I'd been able to go on these different honors council events because now that I'm [in the university honors program], it's like every semester, we have two or three they're going to. Where at Southeast it was like, maybe once in a blue moon going to an actual honors event with others honors students. So, that would have been nice to have been able to do that, but at the same time, it costs money. These councils, they hold events at like Georgia, and they'll hold them in Florida, and they'll hold them all these different places. Sometimes, in Lexington, they'll have a Round Table. I wish there had been more of those opportunities but [the honors program] was kind of its in infancy when I was at Southeast, so I think that it's grown a lot more from what I see- because I have the pages on *Facebook* and stuff for Southeast and I look at the honors stuff and it makes me happy, but at the same time, I wish there had been more of that whenever I had first started because I kind of zipped through Southeast in two years.

More students. Several participants spoke about wanting to expose more students to the experiences and materials from the honors program. Kylie spoke about wanting to get the honors students together in person more. She said if they “actually got to meet maybe once a month, like you could switch campuses each month, all meet together at one campus during class and all get to be together to have class. I think that would be neat.” Felix described feeling frustrated that his brother was not interested in joining, despite how many good things he said to his brother about the program. Iona said “I think it would be great if more people were in it!” Nora spoke about wanting to share some

materials (Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*) she encountered in the honors program with her brother:

I've been bugging my brother like crazy that he needs to read that book; he's been doing homeschooling in high school right now.... You've heard of the *American Pageant*? That book is terrible. That's what's used both in high school and then it's used in our both United States History 1 and 2 at the college level predominantly, and it's a horrible book.... I wanted him to read [Zinn's book], but he wouldn't do it.

Jillian spoke about wanting the program requirements to all be seminar classes, instead of utilizing contract classes:

I really, really enjoy the honors classes. And I think that if there was some way to make the program have to be those classes, which I know it would be hard to do with the short-term students... but I find the most *honors* part of it being in those honors classes.

Marketing and recruitment. One thing that was discussed multiple times was recruitment, how students are identified and invited to apply to the program. Annie pointed out students' misconceptions of the program and how that needs to be countered through marketing:

When students hear "honors" they think that it's going to be hard or scary or difficult, and I didn't think it was any of those things. At times it was challenging, but it was never hard. And a lot of students here on this campus, at least on the Whitesburg campus, don't know about the honors program a whole lot. And

they'll see it on the schedule and be like, "What is this?" I'm like, "It's fun! You should take it!" and they're like, "But it's honors. I'm not smart enough." They feel like they're not good enough, they won't do well, that it's for the "smart people," or whatever. And it's just not true. I feel like they should mention it more to the incoming freshman or just advertise more. I know we have some posters around and stuff like that, but people just pass by. Maybe some sort of, not a conference, but like a meeting, like a "Get to know you. This is our program" or some type thing, kind of like a recruiting event because I feel if people knew what it actually was, that we did do extra things outside of class that are fun, that it's not something to be afraid of, they'd be more likely to join.

Becka also suggested "Maybe the recruitment part" as a place for improvement. She mentioned taking photos and videos at conferences and honors events "to draw people in" and getting involved in college fairs for the high school students. She also discussed student misconceptions about the program by saying

I think a lot of them think it's more smart stuff--you have to be able to write big math equations or something. I think if we really target the high schoolers, some of them might actually want to come and stay and do this....When you transfer, where [the program] is on [the transcript], it's going to help you.

Nora noted that identifying and inviting students when they are early in their time at Southeast is very important:

I think that maybe recruitment could be different. I know that there was people that went under the radar and also who weren't seen until later in their community

college experience that would've benefited from the honors program immensely and would've been an asset, and I'm not really sure how to change that. Part of that has to do with how people approach this environment in the first place.

When I asked for clarification of what she meant by "this environment," she answered

This community college in particular. Because I don't know if it's all [community colleges]. I only have experience with this one but like, based on where they're coming from and where they think they're going, they kind of look at it as "I'm just coming in for a second and then I'm going out" and there's not any sense of strong community that keeps them here for the kind of thing that we would do with the honors program. It's not like they're looking for activities, you know? So then that attitude also translates into "I'm coming in for my class and then...I'm out of here." So then it's harder to get the people that would benefit from [the program] and I do think that, although...they could still benefit from that experience....You have [a student] as an example- he only really started to get into the honors program because he heard me and other people talking about it. And...there's a lot of examples of that. Yeah. I don't know how to fix it. [laughter]...But that's really the big thing. It can be hard to reach if you're not spotted. And also, it's not something that people look at and think "Oh this is the place for me," which maybe it could be helped if we had a larger voice on individual campuses.

Gina also spoke about how posters and word-of-mouth recruitment is limited:

Okay. First of all, I would've never known about honors if it wasn't for [another student]. Most kids do not stop and look at a bulletin board and read, and even if they do stop and read the signs, some of them don't even know what it is or what it's about...and they're just like, "Whatever," and then move on. Really trying to explain and get the word out there, what the honors program is, what the benefits are, and really trying to solidify the fact that it is not as hard or as much to take on as some people might think. Because at first, when she first told me, the first semester, I didn't take honors because I was like, "I ain't doing extra work" and "That's too much!" and once I really understood, it was, "Oh, okay. Well that's not that bad." But again, I would have never known. So I think the advertisement could be [improved]. I don't have a suggestion on how to do it-- word of mouth is always the best I think [but limited]. Especially when you don't have a lot of people in the program and you're trying to recruit. It's difficult.

Emma also talked about recruitment:

I do not regret doing honors. I think that it's better if you have a lot of people, too. But I think people should really know about it, as far as getting it out there, and telling *this* is what it's about. I think once people get into honors, they'll want to

stick with it, and they'll enjoy it. Because it is like you do have this little family, where you get to do things that you wouldn't normally get to do, and it's not just writing papers

Estelle talked about the struggle in identifying students for honors:

In general, just be on the lookout for students who may have not pursued honors degrees otherwise, because if [an honors faculty] hadn't come up to me, I probably would've never considered myself an honors student, because I was kind of feeling down on education at that time in my life. I knew I was skilled, I knew I was talented in something, but, unless a student is identified, once they're in college, they're less likely to seek it out themselves unless they're super ambitious or sure of themselves. So, just work hard to identify those students who don't have that confidence yet, because even though they're adults, that doesn't mean they're good to go or they're confident in their education, and you could miss out on someone who could really make a difference in the program. So that's my advice. I don't really have anything else to say.

Course design. Some of the suggestions for improvement that participants made were about course and curriculum design. Vaughn suggested having a class dedicated to the capstone because "there's some people who have such a busy schedule that [the capstone] kind of gets swept under the rug until the last minute." Estelle borrow from her

experience in her transfer university's honors program: "Maybe getting willing professors like at [the university], they'll have different professors volunteer to teach honors courses so it takes a lot of pressure off of the people who are mainly leading the honors program." She then described some interdisciplinary classes she has taken through her new program as examples:

They'll have an honors course about opera and math combined together with two educators coming together to teach something crazy. And I took a course of Appalachian studies and statistics...course all in one so, kind of having different disciplines coming together or having a teacher or professor take that semester....Not every school will have that luxury, but it would be interesting to see if other educators within the Southeast system would be interested in leading an honors course each semester and take a little bit off of everybody else but be able to add something to the program that maybe hadn't been there before. So that would be something interesting

ITV technology. A recurring suggestion was about the ITV technology, either being distracting, needing improvement, or needing replaced. William said "Better microphones... There was lots of echoing, lots of random static buzzing, it was very disruptive sometimes." Danielle spoke positively about the technology "I thought we had a really good set up. I liked the ITV setup," but then spoke about the challenge of giving presentations to the class over ITV. She said

We were doing some kind of presentation- it was when we had to draw our family trees. And at that time, there just wasn't a very efficient way to display those

things. I think we had to go up to the front and hold it under a [projector] or something. So maybe if there was a more efficient way to do actual up-front presentations where you can see the student as well as that, if you guys don't already have something like that.

And Emma spoke about how ITV made it easy to be distracted, since when one campus was speaking, the other campuses would sometimes have side discussions going and wouldn't be listening to who was on the microphone:

I know most of the time, especially with philosophy and stuff like that, we did a lot of communication; there was a lot of back and forth...it was a lot of discussion. But in some of the other classes, it's more of a lecture. And so, especially through ITV, it's difficult sometimes to kind of, like, stay focused, and kind of get what you're doing if it's [one professor] talking from Harlan campus, and then we're kind of just sitting there. If that makes sense. So that's kind of difficult.... Because it is hard when somebody from another campus is teaching; it's like, "Well, how do you keep people focused on it." But I guess the big thing is just discussion. You know, just asking people what they think on something. Which, I know sometimes that's difficult, depending on what you're going over.

More funding. One way participants thought the program could improve is through more funding. Estelle said her suggestions "would just be funding related. Being able to take those trips is not always feasible. I would like to see more funding go to these programs but that's not my choice." Felix said about the program

Well, you know how I feel about it. I think it's the greatest thing at this institution. PTK is great; it's the number 1 two-year [honors] society or whatever, so I mean, it's not very hard to get into. There's millions of them. There's only a few of us. Wherever I get honored, whatever I get honored for, I'm going to still say, "Yeah, well, I'm a KCTCS honors kid so you can thank part of that-" and by God, you better realize, when I start working too, y'all be getting some donations from *moi*. You know, take them kids to Spain or something... Like a real institution would do for their honors program.

Assignment design. Some suggestions for improvement were assignments, particularly the projects and assignments students did to make up for not being able to attend extracurricular activities. Emma spoke about the make-up assignments:

I guess, to me, it was like, "Okay, well, you know, they actually did something fun and creative, and then here I have to write a paper kind of to make that up." But I mean, I do see, too, it's like, "Well, how do you make up that grade?" You can't really just go on another hike by yourself... I guess that was a big thing.

William spoke about the grading of non-traditional assignments, and he suggested those assignments could be graded more stringently:

My last semester I know a lot of people were complaining about having to write too much... I [suggest] more stuff like identity mask painting... something in that vein that is not just for fun I guess, sort of as a project that you grade harshly on.

Well, not super harshly, just more harshly than like, we're having a fun day-- something more interactive than just writing a blog or a paper.

Help with transfer. Other than marketing and recruitment, the most common suggestion for improvement surrounded assisting students with transfer. Estelle had the idea of giving students in the program a brief survey asking “What are your plans after Southeast? And would you be interesting in transferring to honors?” And if they are, find out which colleges the students are interested in and then find out if those institutions have honors programs, and if so, get information about the program:

That way you can tell your student, “You can transfer to this college, if you want. It has honors; they will take you as an honors.” So being able to open up that line of communication between other institutions and identifying the person in their honors program who wants to see your student succeed as well, would be wonderful because I remember when all this was going on, I got with [the rep at my university’s honors program and she] expressed that she really wanted me in the program and thought that my case was a special case and a really important one, and they only had like maybe twenty students like me and she was very happy to see that I was interested. And between [Southeast honors faculty] and her and that recommendation letter that [was] sent for me for the honors program, it was an easy transition and I felt confident about it. And it was made easy for me because that line of communication was easily opened, just being able to tell the students, “Hey! I’ve spoken to their honors department and they’re thinking about sending scholarships, or they want you to let you know that they want you to come check out their program.” Maybe go to other colleges and tour and talk to

people from their honors program just to motivate them. Because I *do* think that the people who are in the honors programs have a higher rate of staying in school...maybe keep them wanting to go to college and keep them wanting to pursue higher education even if they feel a little discouraged at the time....In addition, just trying to give your students as many opportunities or supply them with outlets to attempt to get outside scholarships to do the things that they want to do. Even if your program can't do it.

Marie's suggestions for improvement were about transfer as well:

The only improvements that I can suggest are take more campus tours--ensure that students transfer and go to bigger things after Southeast. Push transfers, push higher education. These are all things the honors program does anyway, but, this is my suggestion to keep doing it.

Danielle, who had what she called a "failed" first transfer and found success at her second institution, spoke about this as well:

I have often thought- and I kind of alluded to it earlier- but if Southeast would let me, I would right now, go to each campus and teach an intro to transfer class. And I know my experience was negative largely on my own merit, but I've spoken to several community college transfer students whose transfer experiences kind of line up at certain points. And I think that there are definitely things that community college students that are planning to transfer to four-year intuitions, and later get a terminal degree, definitely need to know that we're either not told, not taught, or it just doesn't occur to us. And I think there's an environment that's

best suited to be a preparatory class like that, I think it would be the honors program. And now, maybe, this is just reflective of that I just didn't know what questions to ask and again that might not be universal but then there might be three or four other people who also don't know to ask these questions....I mean, I was halfway through my semester at [the university] before I had ever heard of the GRE. And now granted, a community college transfer student is probably still a solid year away before they need to even start thinking about that, but there might be other people like me who have never even heard of it and have no idea what it's used for. So even just a brief, "Hey let's have a transfer day and talk about all of this stuff that you're going to encounter down the road" and talk about what the GRE is and what it's used for and why it's important. And then also, I'm still not sure if I know what a CV is. I kind of know but I'm still not positive I know exactly what goes on it and what needs to be left off of it. Practical stuff like that and really take these kids by the shoulder and be like "Don't be like Danielle, conferences are important. Just suck it up. DO a conference." I told the Middlesboro students that right before you guys went to Orlando. I just so happened to be visiting and a couple of people were kind of talking about doing the conference and I'm like, "Do it! Do it! You have no idea how actually important that is." And then [talk] about getting undergraduate research grants and pretty much preparing them for what's going to be on a grad school application. And part of me thinks, that might be a little too early but the other part of me knows that the two years after that will fly by for them so fast. And it's also during that two years at your transfer institution that that stuff does

get absolutely important, and maybe if they're not going to learn it anywhere else, I think that they should learn it in the honors program because it is the honors students who are most likely to go on and do things like that.

Career guidance. Lydia suggested having job fairs or other activities for career exploration: “Maybe we could do like workshops or something? Have people come in and talk about different professions?” She continued, “Maybe we could have people come in and talk about some of the professional skills you’ll use on a daily basis [in different professions]. Things like that might be useful.”

Conclusion

When participants spoke about their time with Southeast’s honors program, whether it was two semesters or more, overwhelmingly, they expressed a positive perception of those experiences. If they chose to not finish the honors requirements and complete the program, it was because of conflicts with their major program schedules or because of changes in their intended date of graduation or transfer. It was not because they were dissatisfied with their experience of their honors program. Most suggestions for improvement were to improve recruitment and marketing so more students would understand what the program is and join, for improved technology in the ITV classrooms, offering more classes each semester, and more funding for additional extracurricular activities, trips, and events.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusion

The student participants in this study form a very diverse population. They are not diverse in some ways, being mostly white, mostly female, and almost entirely native-born, but they are diverse in other ways. They have a mixture of experience with homeschool, public school, private school, coming to college straight out of high school, having a failed first attempt at college only to return later, or coming to college after a career. They range from teenagers to mid-forties in age, span the spectrum of having tremendous support to having no support, and being from a family of educators to their parents not even finishing high school.

Student Perceptions

Overall, the participants expressed positive feelings about their honors program experiences. They went in-depth and spoke at length when asked to talk about the positive and beneficial experiences they had with in the honors program. They struggled to name negatives or drawbacks they experienced in the honors program. And when the final question "Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of the honors program?" was asked, the majority of them answered with positive, summarizing statements such as "I think I said all I can. I mean, it's a great program," and "I think it's absolutely worth it," and "I think it was a really get experience. I feel it expanded my mental horizons," and "If it hadn't been for the honors program, I really don't think I would be doing as well as I am right now." One participant's interview ended this way:

Me: Well, I'm pretty much done with my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience with the honors program?

Student: Thank you for doing it.

Me: Thank you for being a part of it.

Student: I don't know—I have no idea what I would've done without it.

Of course we must keep in mind that as the researcher, I have also been their faculty member, oftentimes in their English classes as well as their honors classes, and as such, they may have been in 2, 3, 4, 5, or even 6 of my classes. Additionally, they are aware I am the director of the program. That means these participants know that, in large part, what the honors program is or is not could be seen as a reflection of my ability and efforts, as well as a reflection of their other faculty members. That is why before interviewing, it was stressed to the participants that this study was being conducted with the hopes of improving our program, as well as programs at other schools like ours, and that there was no penalty or reward for anything they would say during the interview. It was stressed that only their honesty would be useful. To help students be reflective about what improvements could be made, if the student could not think of *drawbacks* or *negatives*, the wording was changed to *challenges* or *obstacles*, and then after they were done speaking, another question was asked as to what *improvements* could be made for future students. This last question received the most detailed answers. After they were done discussing improvements, they were then asked *Anything else?* and if they said no, the interview moved to the next topic. Hopefully these efforts made participants feel more comfortable critiquing aspects of the program and helped the results from the

interviews be reflective of participants' actual perceptions of the program, both the strengths and weaknesses.

Intellectual needs. Most positives that were spontaneously discussed were about the honors courses themselves. Overwhelmingly, participants mentioned the discussion format of the seminar classes positively. Some of the negatives participants brought up about discussion were technology-based, or students not listening when someone from another campus was speaking (made possible by the ITV technology where all microphones on the campuses are turned off and only the one person speaking has their microphone turned on). But the majority of the comments made about discussion was that it was engaging, enjoyable, exposed participants to new ideas and perspectives, allowed participants to open and express themselves, was more enjoyable than a lecture format, fostered discovery of meaningful connections, and helped participants learn about themselves. Most participants also stated they prefer “hands-on” assignments and classes, so it makes sense they would enjoy an active classroom conversation instead of a passive lecture.

Multiple participants mentioned they enjoyed the creative assignments in the courses, such as painting identity masks or writing poems. Many participants also positively discussed being taken out of their “comfort zone.” Sometimes that was attributed to speaking in class and sometimes that was a reading assignment or topic being covered. Participants were divided on whether or not they prefer to select their own topics for assignments, which the literature states gifted students do prefer. Those who said they struggle with self-directed projects attributed that to either they enjoy being given a topic and facing the challenge of finding a way to make it successful, or they

have too many interesting ideas and feel paralyzed by the options. The criticisms participants made about coursework focused mainly on the honors contract classes being a heavy workload and/or not being as interesting as the seminar classes (though many participants really enjoyed their contract classes), and the workload overall, especially when working on capstone projects in addition to other obligations. Several participants, when they voiced this criticism about the workload, buffered the statement by declaring themselves a procrastinator or something similar.

So, overall, participants expressed that they were satisfied with how the honors program was engaging and meeting their intellectual needs.

Social needs. When participants were asked about their interactions with peers (honors and non-honors) and faculty (honors and non-honors), overwhelmingly, the responses were also positive. There was less of a difference between their responses about honors faculty and non-honors faculty than their responses about honors peers and non-honors peers, and a possible explanation for that could be that in many cases, the faculty roles overlapped. The faculty member who is teaching the honors seminar class could also be the participant's writing or literature or film professor, or might be the faculty sponsor for the student organization they are in, or might be their supervisor in the tutor lab. When differentiation was made between honors faculty and non-honors faculty, it was always positive toward honors faculty. Often, participants attributed a deeper connection to honors faculty than their non-honors faculty because of more personal discussions in the classroom and spending time together outside of class doing extracurricular activities and trips.

There was quite a difference in the responses about honors peers and non-honors peers. Several participants felt hesitant to discuss those differences so as not to sound arrogant or mean. But when they did discuss those differences, they said they had deeper connections with their honors peers, they developed friendships with them, and they shared themselves more than with their non-honors peers. They mentioned having similar interests and abilities as their honors peers which was sometimes lacking with non-honors peers. They expressed enjoyment at getting to meet students from other majors and other campuses that they would not have known without the honors program.

Participants also compared their experiences with faculty and peers before and after Southeast to their honors experience, and those were all positive as well toward their experiences in the honors program. They placed their interactions with honors faculty and honors peers at least on par with their good experiences before and/or after Southeast, and very frequently placed the honors interactions higher than the others.

With such strong, positive perceptions of the interpersonal experience in the honors program, this points to investigating potential use of the cohort model in SKCTC's honors program and if that model would be effective, meaningful, and beneficial for students during their time in the program. A cohort is "a group of learners who share common learning experiences in order to build a stable, ongoing professional community" (Witteveen, 2015, p. 42). Cohorts are groups of 10-25 students who begin the program together and move through the sequence of classes and experiences together, and the research shows substantial positives and also difficulties in these systems (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, & Wright-Porter, 2011).

The suggestions for improvements for the social aspects of the honors program were getting more students to participate, getting students across campuses together more, and finding ways to alleviate pressure on the three honors faculty members. Overall, the participants' responses demonstrate that they are satisfied that their academic social needs are being met through honors program interactions.

Professional needs. The responses showed that participants were more on the fence about how their professional needs were being met through their honors program experiences. When discussing the extracurricular events and activities, participants touched on many intellectual and social aspects of those (such as learning new things at conferences and getting to know other students on extended trips), and they also discussed the professional aspects of many of those activities. Mostly, they discussed the professional implications of campus tours, résumé building, and conferences. Unilaterally, participants felt completing the honors program would be beneficial for them when applying for transfer and scholarships, and that it would give them an advantage for school and job applications. Several participants mentioned this as a primary reason they were motivated to join the honors program. Multiple participants who had transferred to other institutions stated that the honors program helped prepare them for upper level classes and coursework. When discussing campus tours, some participants mentioned they chose their transfer institution because of a campus tour they went on, or they learned about scholarships during those campus tours. About conferences, participants spoke positively of the professional benefits they gained, including refining their career goals, presenting their research, and overcoming their anxiety of public speaking.

More suggestions for improvement were offered for participants' professional needs than their intellectual or social needs. Some of the suggestions included assistance with transfer. Participants who have already transferred discussed how it would be helpful for those in Southeast's honors program to be offered information about nearby institutions and their honors programs, learn about GRE testing, have increased assistance in applying for scholarships and programs, and have honors advisors connect students and faculty advisors at the receiving institutions. Participants who had a failed transfer before transferring to another institution did not express a direct connection between these issues, but it is possibly a place for impact to cut down on future failed transfers, or at the very least making transfer more efficient. In addition to campus visits each semester, the honors seminar classes could have aspects of transfer-prep built into them.

Overall, participants were partially satisfied with how their professional needs were being met by their experiences in the honors program, but that has clear room for improvement.

Appalachian Community College Impact

Appalachia's challenges featured heavily in the participant interviews. Whether participants were originally from the region or not, the challenges of the region's economy shaped their career goals. Many commented on job availability, as well as lack of social and professional opportunities. Some very strongly stated they wanted to leave the region for various reasons, but several who said they wanted to stay expressed concern that they might *have* to leave to build a career. Some mentioned wanting to help

their communities through their careers. Many students discussed first-generation status, geographical challenges to education and employment, the poverty of the region, as well as stereotypes and the impact of these experiences. Participants also mirrored the research on community colleges in several ways. They were quite diverse in age and family structure. Some of them had taken developmental coursework before joining the honors program. Many of them worked full-time or part-time while going to school. Some of the challenges they experienced and improvements they suggested hovered around these issues, such as job fairs, résumé building, and transfer issues. That points to an opportunity for the honors program to be instrumental in job fairs and professional development offerings for the college and community at large, which could help students before they get into the program, and additionally, those who never join the program or even attend the college.

Policy Implications

The social contract of the community college sets the educational mission to serve all students who come in the door. The research has shown that gifted students, like other groups of students, have specific needs, and the research has shown that they can be underserved in their educational experience. Honors programs are a way to better serve this population, and as a result, better help the community college fulfill its mission. The participants of this study have shown the positive ways their honors program influenced their personal and professional development, from the very small and tangible ways, to deeply life-changing, intangible ways. The policy implications of the literature and this study within that context are:

1. Community colleges should develop, maintain, and support honors programs for their gifted students, just as they provide developmental education, disability accommodations, and other services for different groups of students and their particular needs. As such, appropriate funding, support, and resources need to be allocated to the establishment, growth, and maintenance of honors programs.
2. Community colleges in Appalachia are exceptionally important because resources and opportunities can be lacking in the surrounding areas, leaving students with few alternate avenues for professional development, travel, exposure to transfer institutions, development of career goals, or opportunity for community building. As such, honors programs must be a priority to these institutions, especially to the rural schools that often have fewer nearby resources compared to urban schools.
3. The research shows that gifted students desire complexity and meaning in their work. This study shows how certain classroom structures, activities, and learning can be deeply influential and life-changing for students. Students can have more growth and learning from new experiences and skills than they will from just acing another exam of memorized content. As such, the sharing and refining of ideas and information through experiential learning and shared class discovery and discussion needs to be a built-in pedagogy in honors courses. Extracurricular events, trips, conferences, and activities must also be a built-in component of these honors programs.
4. Honors programs have a responsibility to the students in their service area to assess the program's policies and impact so as to continually refine how the

program is meeting the students' intellectual, social, and professional needs. As such, honors faculty, advisors, directors, and supervisors need to establish expectations and requirements for program assessment, continuing research, and professional development of faculty and staff. Honors faculty and staff need to stay engaged with the research on honors programs so that best practices can be enacted and refined.

5. Recruitment of students is an opportunity for increased equity and fairness, and identification procedures need to take into consideration the research literature's assessments on underidentification of particular groups of students. As such, honors programs in Appalachia need to assess and refine identification and recruitment strategies to ensure that those populations of students vulnerable to underidentification are being recognized.
6. Honors programs in Appalachia need to build strong relationships with transfer institutions. This will help students transition from one institution to the next, and one phase of their education to the next, but this also helps build a much-needed web of opportunity and support for gifted students in Appalachia. As such, it should be a built-in goal of these honors programs to establish connections and articulation agreements with receiving 4-year institutions.

Further Research

There is so little research to be found at this particular intersection of the four large bodies of research of gifted students, community colleges, honors programs, and Appalachia. Since these students at these institutions have very specific experiences, challenges, tendencies, and opportunities, there needs to be more research about this

intersection. If it is in the students', institutions', and communities' best interests to offer thriving honors programs at community colleges in Appalachia, we need to know how best to make these programs thrive. Not all gifted community college students have the same needs and experiences, not all students in Appalachia have the same needs and experiences, and not all community colleges in Appalachia are the same. What works in a small, rural school like SKCTC might not work in a big, urban community college even though both are in Appalachian counties. And when looking at the demographics, we need to look at how to recruit and graduate more male students, more minority students, and more non-transfer students from honors program. We need to research ways these honors programs can help recruit and retain skilled faculty at these specific Appalachian colleges. We need to explore different Appalachian institutions and programs to see if there are policies and practices that can be shared to help build a stronger educational experience for the gifted students in the region, especially those at community colleges. We need to research how these honors programs can serve as an important bridge for gifted students from K-12 into the community college, and then beyond, either to their transfer institutions or into the workforce. We need to research ways these honors programs can help foster community building in places that are suffering from economic downturn and population loss.

Conclusion

There is tremendous opportunity in our community colleges. We have the chance to improve education for a large group in our region. We have the chance to improve our opportunities for faculty, staff, and for our communities. While these are important for all community colleges throughout the nation, their importance is amplified in Appalachia.

This region has its particular challenges, which means thriving community college honors programs can be a component in the evolution of the region's present and future. These programs can affect the lives of the students, as well as the faculty and staff, and the lives of the institutions and communities themselves. They can be a strong force for change. We need to make them the priority they deserve to be.

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