Marginalized First-Time Honors Students Explain the Impact of Tracking Labels

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Abstract: Many of the variables that determine college admission are beyond a student's control, including the academic track they were assigned as early as primary school, a practice often referred to as "ability grouping" or constructing "skills-homogeneous" classes. Even in higher education, students feel the effects of unequal sorting and sifting from tracking. The purpose of this study was to learn from marginalized community college students placed in low- and middle-track courses in high school how taking honors courses for the first time shaped their perceptions of their identities. Data were gathered from a single cohort at a midwestern community college through a two-part interview and digital diary recordings from six participants who self-identified as socially marginalized. Results show that low- and middle-track placement in high school has negative effects on a student's self-confidence and mental health into adulthood. Findings reveal that educators' behaviors and peer-to-peer interactions are negatively influenced by low-track placement. Respondents reported that while labels and stereotypes assigned to academic tracks continue in community college, honors enrollment improves a student's self-confidence.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; community college students; track system (education); educational equalization; College of DuPage (IL) – Honors Program

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Since the 1980s, researchers have analyzed the various ways so-called "ability grouping" has impacted student learning. Educational theorists dating back to the early 1900s, like John Dewey (1916), have argued that sorting and ranking students are harmful to their learning. Shortly preceding Dewey, the Committee of Ten claimed students should learn in the

same classrooms, unless they were well-below intelligence levels (National Educational Association, 1894). Later, critical theorists like Paulo Freire and Michel Foucault have suggested that sorting and ranking individuals are forms of power, rendering people in these hierarchical structures as powerless and crafting in them a learned sense of hopelessness (Foucault cited in Ferguson, 2000; Freire 1970/1993).

Sorting and ranking high school students into what we now call tracks of so-called "ability groups"—low, middle, and honors—negatively affects students' self-perception. While similar to early research from Claude M. Steele (1997, 2010) on stereotype threat, this study also shows how negative self-perception impacts mental health well into adulthood. Students internalize the labels assigned to low-tracked high school classrooms, and teachers' behaviors toward low-track students contribute to feelings of inadequacy for those in both high school and college. Marginalized students in low-track classes are damaged by this system that makes them feel lesser, not only because peer-to-peer interactions tell them they are not welcome, but because labels like "general" or "regular" mark their inadequacy. These feelings of inadequacy follow students who take honors courses for the first time in a community college. The purpose of this study was to learn from marginalized community college students who were in low- and middle-track courses in high school how their perceptions, and the stereotyping perpetuated by this tracking are affected by first-time honors course enrollment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tracking

Tracking separates students into college-bound, intermediate, or low-level vocational tracks as early as fourth grade and is dependent upon test scores and classroom performance (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Research shows tracking and socio-economic standing (SES) greatly influence the opportunity gap and widen the achievement gap (Gorski, 2018; Kotok, 2017; Kozol, 1992). The literature shows that White students have disproportionately benefited from high-track/college-bound classrooms where Black students have had little representation (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Kozol, 1992; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Thompson, 2002). Based on this information, racial identity and socio-economic standing are proven to influence a student's placement in tracked classrooms.

Tracking and Race

As a result of de jure and de facto segregation, students of all races attend school together, but they receive vastly different curricula depending on the course track and neighborhood in which they live (Clotfelter, 2004; Gorski, 2018; Kozol, 1992; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 1985/2005). Some theorists see tracking as a means used to separate White students from Black peers once schools were desegregated (Clotfelter, 2004). The review of literature explains how scholars conclude that tracking is racialized, particularly when examining racially diverse high schools.

Researchers also examined the racial structures of tracked classrooms at diverse high schools. Low-level math courses at a racially diverse high school are predominantly filled with African American students (Rubin et al., 2006). Researchers studying a school of 3,000 students celebrated for racial diversity found students are segregated in classrooms because of tracking (Noguera & Wing, 2006). In total, 83% of students placed in low-track classes were African American, while 87% in Honors Geometry were White (Rubin et al., 2006). Tracking becomes racialized when large numbers of students from one racial group are separated into tracks, with low-track classes seeing a disproportionate number of minority students, and high-tracked classrooms filled with privileged racial groups.

Schools are areas where racialized spaces, like those seen in studies on tracking, impact how students view themselves (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Thompson, 2002). Black students straddle two cultures between home and school, often feeling like outsiders at school (Thompson, 2002). Research shows that high- or mid-tracked Black students leave gifted classrooms for advanced or mid-tracked classes to be with their peers (Thompson, 2002; Tyson, 2011). School employees can and do contribute to the racialized treatment of students, and the way students are treated at school influences their motivation and learning (Jencks & Phillips, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Thompson, 2002; Steele, 1997).

Research shows racial stereotypes form when classrooms are racialized—when one racial group dominates a tracked classroom (Tyson, 2011). Black students in racially diverse high schools associate stereotypes with track placement, identifying Whiteness as giftedness, since most high-tracked classrooms are filled with White students and Black students are disproportionately placed in low-tracked classrooms. Black students at diverse high schools feel pressured by peers to avoid being associated with "brainiacs" and people who do not look like them (Tyson, 2011, p. 51). The

literature shows that Black students report feeling isolated, resented, and labeled for being smart or for being separated into high-tracked classes; moreover, they often leave gifted classrooms to be with friends (Thompson, 2002; Tyson, 2011).

Behavior—and a student's ability to behave appropriately—is often associated with where students are placed in tracked classrooms (Ferguson, 2000; Legette, 2018; Smith, 2008). Labels based on track placement lead to an association of stereotypes, and students experience "stereotype threat" when they are labeled in academic spaces (Steele, 1997, p. 614). Steele (1997) describes "stereotype threat" as a "predicament" that can be "self-threatening," arising from when someone is "doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies" (p. 614). The existing stereotype is perpetuated, like assigning various "ability" labels to people in low-tracked classes, and "members of these groups can fear being reduced to that stereotype" (Steele, 1997, p. 614).

Ability labels that demonstrate stereotype threat are presented in Legette's (2018) study. Black students enrolled in middle school honors courses racialized the behaviors of students in non-honors courses, noting disruptive behaviors, while "being a good student" is associated with honors distinctions (Legette, 2018, p. 1321). Students viewed non-honors learners as "academically slow," "bad," and "non-learners," while honors students are "motivated, hard workers, and smart" (Legette, 2018, p. 1323).

Teachers' Behaviors Toward Tracked Students

Studies on teachers' assumptions and behaviors toward students in low-track classes demonstrate how teachers see low-tracked students' abilities as more fixed, whereas high-track students are seen as having more, if not limitless, potential (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). Teachers in Australia were interviewed about their perceptions of ability in their students, and comments included assumptions that "there's a lot of kids that aren't suited for school" (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017, p. 352). First appearing in 1985, Oakes's (2005) early study on tracking looked at ways teachers used punitive language when speaking with students, using a punitiveness scale to ask students about teachers' behaviors toward students. Oakes (2005) and her team note high-track students had more varied responses about the ways teachers were punitive with prompts like "the teacher makes fun of some students," or "this teacher hurts my feelings" (p. 109). Oakes and her team also noted a difference in teachers' behaviors with high-track teachers using behaviors "thought to promote learning" more so than low-track teachers (p. 110).

Studies on middle school students in lower-tracked courses show the importance of positive relationships between the teacher and student (Sainio et al., 2023). In their examination of the impact teacher closeness had on students determined to have learning difficulties (LD), researchers discovered that a close relationship with a teacher caused a student to have positive academic emotions. In contrast, researchers found that a low presence of teacher closeness caused students to have "increased learning-related anger and boredom" (Sainio et al., 2023, p. 160).

Community College Honors Programs

By the mid-1980s, community college honors programs were seen as transfer partnerships, creating academically prepared students who would better succeed in 4-year university programs (Kane, 2001). Recent estimates now claim that over 1,000 community colleges in the United States have honors programs (Chen, 2020). Honors program entrance requirements vary between baccalaureate and two-year colleges. While only 13% of the community college honors programs required essays or letters in 1999, in 2017, 40% of community colleges had an application essay for their honors program, and 20% of the programs also had an interview as part of the application process (Cognard-Black et al., 2017; Outcalt, 1999). Other community colleges required a recommendation from an advisory committee (Floyd & Holloway, 2006). Trends in the literature show that the entrance barriers to community college honors program have increased over the years, with some exceptions.

Studies show myriad benefits for students enrolled in honors programs. Research shows community college honors students are over 30% more likely to graduate from college than non-honors students, are more engaged in challenging programming, and have more access to their professors (Honeycutt, 2019). Community college honors courses boast rigorous curricula, experiential learning, transfer scholarships, regular colloquia, research seminars, and professional development/administrative support for honors faculty (Floyd & Holloway, 2006). Community college honors instructors are found to be more experienced and more engaged in "activities related to research and scholarship" than their colleagues in developmental courses (Kisker & Outcalt, 2005, p. 7). Additionally, community college honors programs are described as having "prestige, resources, and selectivity of both faculty and students," the same elements used to separate elite universities from community colleges (Floyd & Holloway, 2006; Honeycutt, 2019; Shavit et al., 2007, p. 5).

In a community college honors program, students build identities based on the assumptions people make about the domain they occupy. Community college students already face stereotypes as a result of the college ranking system, with elite universities on top and community colleges on the bottom (Labaree, 2013; Shavit et al., 2007). But honors students, one sub-group of the community college, are viewed as gifted, motivated, and ambitious (Floyd & Holloway, 2006). Students in this environment are identified with achievement and, in Steele's (1997) words, are more likely to "attain success" based on the domain they occupy (p. 613).

METHODOLOGY

To discover how students make meaning out of their experiences in community college honors programs and their past experiences with tracking, interviews and audio diaries served to capture students' responses. This single-institution study focused on a large suburban community college near Chicago, with enrollment hovering around 20,000 in 2024. The college and the county where it resides will be referred to as Midhills, a pseudonym. The college is set in an affluent suburb, with a median household income of $128,132 (U.S. Census, 2024). GPA and SAT scores are the current entrance requirement for Midhills's honors courses. To attain eligibility for honors course enrollment, "a student must complete eight (8) hours or more of college-level coursework and earn a cumulative GPA of 3.2/4.0 or higher. Students who have not completed eight (8) hours of college-level coursework must meet one of the following criteria: high school cumulative GPA of 3.5/4.0 or a composite SAT score of 1200 or a composite ACT score of 25" (Midhills Community College, 2023).

Table 1 contains the participants listed by pseudonym, age, race, parents' education, and number of community college honors courses taken at the time of the study. Most of the participants were first-generation college students whose parents did not graduate from college. Five of the six participants identified as economically disadvantaged either while in primary school, secondary school, or in community college.

The sample size of six students might seem small and inconclusive to our discourse community; however, the limitations of the study produced this result. To qualify for this rare cohort, students in the study had to 1) be taking honors courses for the first time in community college (in

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parents' Education	Number of CC Honors Courses
Haley	22	Bi-Racial	Did not complete college	1
Amina	18	South-Asian	Bachelor's and Master's Degree earners	1
Sidney	26	White	Did not complete college	1
Eduardo	22	Hispanic or Latino	Master's Degree	1
Jordan	21	White	Some college	5
Daniel	30	Mexican-American	Did not complete college	1

other words, they did not take honors in high school), and 2) identify as socially marginalized (excluded from mainstream society for economic, racial, cultural, religious, or other factors). Out of over 1,000 students who could potentially qualify for the study as marginalized community college students taking honors courses for the first time, only fifty believed they met the criteria. Of those 50, only 25 claimed to be first-time honors students who also self-identified as marginalized. Of the 25 who qualified, only seven responded to the researchers' requests for participation. After the seventh participant was interviewed, it was revealed that they had taken International Baccalaureate courses in high school, therefore disqualifying them from the study. Based on the low number of study participants, it appears that most of the students contacted who were taking honors at the community college level had already taken honors courses in high school, or they did not identify as marginalized.

This study included a two-part interview, which took place in either one or two face-to-face or Zoom sessions, and three digital diary recordings focusing on the students' past educational experiences, their current lived experience in the honors program, and reflections on the meaning of their educational experiences (Seidman, 2006).

FINDINGS

Negative Labels Assigned by Teachers

As the research in the literature review shows, teachers make assumptions about students based on their track placement. Students in this study who were enrolled in lower tracks internalized labels from high school teachers, which made them believe they were not good enough for high-track courses. Both Daniel and Sidney had been out of high school for at least seven years. In an interview, Sidney explained that her teachers had negatively represented her ability to succeed in college:

> A lot of my teachers were unfortunately pretty discouraging. I had a lot of teachers tell me that "Oh, it's okay, like some people just aren't meant to be in academics. Like some people just aren't meant to, you know, some people just can't do math and that's okay. You know, it's okay if you have to go into the trades or something." I had a school counselor tell me that I shouldn't try to go to a major school [laugh] because, "oh, well, you know, students, like you, it seems like you wouldn't be very successful."

Sidney's response illustrates how students are shaped to follow a career path deemed appropriate for them by people in positions of authority. Being labeled as a high school student who "wouldn't be very successful" in college tells the student they do not belong in an academic environment. Likewise, Daniel's high school teacher stereotyped his group of friends by their Mexican-American heritage. In an interview, Daniel explained:

> It's kind of like expected of young Mexican Americans to be more 'street' I guess. If we did well in schools, like, "Oh wow, you're doing a good job" type thing. It even came to a point where a teacher, she said, "Oh, well, you know, they don't expect much of you Mexican boys, so you'll probably get a lot of like scholarships and stuff like that." She was trying to motivate me, but I mean, just seeing it now, it's kind of like low.

While Daniel attempts to diffuse his teacher's oppressive behavior by claiming his teacher was trying to "motivate" him, the teacher in fact used a racial stereotype to label Daniel. Seminal research on counter-culture groups explains how teachers who belittle students function as "one of the most oppressive forces" they encounter (Willis, 1977, p. 77) Other participants

in this study described the negative impact this type of belittling had on their self-image.

Jordan, who grew up in poverty and sometimes had to choose which days he would eat and which days he would go hungry, explained ways these labels still have an impact on him today. In an interview, Jordan shared some of the comments teachers made to his parents about his performance in school:

> But he doesn't do homework. He doesn't pay attention in class. And so that also, I think, contributed to that inferiority complex of like, I will never be a good student, so why would I even try? Just kind of being told I'm not doing something right my whole life, no one considered. . . . I think I internalized it to reject the whole system.

In the same way Sidney's teachers spoke to her, Jordan rejected school because his teachers told him he was not good enough. While other students in the study were not directly told they were not good enough, Amina also recalled the way her teachers made her feel inferior and incompetent by constantly comparing her non-honors cohort to high-tracked students. In a digital diary recording, Amina said:

> Teachers, even if they didn't do it intentionally, would sometimes compare us regular non-honors students with their honor classes, saying that if we couldn't complete assignments on time, they were baffled because their honors classes had even more homework than us and they still did it. And it just made us feel as if there was something wrong with us that we couldn't do it.

Based on these findings, we can see how the way high schools rank students' classes by so-called ability grouping has a substantial impact on the way in which low- and middle-tracked students perceive their own abilities. Not only do students experience feelings of inferiority as a result of low- and middle-track placement and the remarks of their teachers, but they can also feel ostracized because of their family's socio-economic status.

Barriers to Peer-to-Peer Interactions

Evidence from this study illuminates how some socially marginalized people living below the poverty level describe the challenges they faced when interacting with other students. Participants in the study were made fun of when they did not have new school supplies. Other disadvantaged students

grew up in households where one financial setback, like a broken washing machine, led to negative attention from peers.

Sidney explained that her father made less than $20,000 per year and her mother did not work. In an interview, she described the way teachers and peers alienated her because she attended school in dirty clothing:

> I would get bullied for not having new clothes, like our washing machine and dryer broke for a long time and we couldn't fix it. So I got made fun of a lot for having dirty clothes. I think it really affected my classes, especially because people didn't really wanna listen to me 'cuz they were like, "Oh, look at you. You're not clean, like whatever, like you don't obviously—you don't know anything."

In a similar way to how her teachers labeled her as someone who did not belong in school—someone who didn't try hard enough and wasn't successful enough—Sidney's peers fed her messages to alienate her from the dominant group. By pointing out Sidney's unwashed clothing, her peers drew attention to something outside of her control: her parents could not afford to fix the washing machine, so she had to wear soiled clothing. The circumstances of poverty led to traumatizing social situations in school.

Growing up in poverty also contributed to participants feeling rejected by their peers. Because Sidney's family could not afford new school supplies, or a computer in the home, Sidney explained in the interview that she was made fun of. Her family could not afford new school supplies, and since she did not want to be made fun of for having a used binder, she chose to leave it at home. Without a solution to her lack of financial resources, Sidney said she was "discouraged to even bring them [school supplies] in at that point. Cause I was like, ah, well, you know, even if I bring them in, people are gonna look at me and like, 'oh, oh look at that ratty old binder that you've been using for like 10 years.'" As a result, Sydney was less prepared to participate in daily educative activities. In some cases, teachers take away points when students do not have the right school supplies. Sydney's experiences demonstrate how economically disadvantaged students are shown that they do not belong in school.

Like other participants, transportation is a heavy burden for students whose families are financially disadvantaged, whether it's the stress of paying for gasoline or the heavy financial burden of owning more than one car. Amina described how living in an economically disadvantaged household made her feel ashamed, which led her to withdraw from participation in school. Amina did not participate in extracurricular activities since she did

not have transportation because her parents could not afford a second car. While Amina's financial situation is not as disadvantaged as Sidney's, these descriptions suggest how students living in poverty are well aware of the way a lack of financial resources excludes them from social groups.

Jordan noted that even in community college, he still struggles with the trauma of growing up in poverty, which he sees as a barrier to interacting with peers. At the time of the interview, Jordan was home insecure. He emancipated himself from his parents to qualify for the Pell Grant. As he did in elementary school, Jordan still has days where he goes hungry from a lack of financial resources. In a digital diary recording, Jordan explained how he has a difficult time forming lasting friendships:

> It's hard to feel the energy to talk to people when I'm stressed out about all these different things . . . on top of all the trauma and dealing with all that past stuff, it's just an endless loop . . . here's all this stuff coming back to me that happened when I was younger. So a lot of that trauma relates back to poverty and being homeless and just stuff like that too. Um, so it's hard to fit in with people is my point. It's hard to make friends.

Findings from this study show that students with fewer financial resources than their peers feel excluded from dominant peer groups. Economically disadvantaged students in the study felt ashamed about financial disadvantages like being unable to afford new school supplies or having access to a second family car that could shuttle them to extracurricular activities. College students living below the poverty line continue to struggle with trauma from being home insecure in secondary school.

Identities Assigned by Tracking

Labels based on the hierarchical tracking structure leave a deep impact on a student's self-perception. In Table 2 below, participants described various labels like social class, intelligence, race, behaviors, appearance, and other notable assumptions and stereotypes borne from tracked classrooms.

Table 2 helps illustrate the dichotomous labels given to low- and high-tracked students. Intelligence labels assigned to low-track students include stupid, below average, dumb, and being in "dumb kid classes," while honors students were labeled as intelligent. Low-track high school students were labeled as "less affluent" and lesser when it came to social class, while their honors colleagues were considered affluent and described as having "all these resources." Labels to describe racial backgrounds of high school

students in low-track classes included minorities and people of color, while one of the participants in the study, Haley, recognized that her high school AP Literature class had "only one Black person" in it. Jordan described how racialized spaces in high school led to stereotypes. In a digital diary recording, he said:

> I was always like, Asian and Indian kids were like the AP honors kids. I'm not saying that this is how it actually was, [but it was] the perception that I had at the time, and the perception that was, I guess, the normative lens, if you wanna put it that way. Fancy academic talk. . . .When you see a classroom and it's still mostly White people, but there's a more considerable amount of, say Asian people or Black people or whatever person of color you're discussing or observing, it always seems like there's a lot in there, even though in reality, you know, it's really not, not that many compared to White people.

Jordan later described the subconscious way students internalize racialized stereotypes: "the racist stereotypes . . . like, Asian people are smarter, better at math, all this sort of thing." As a White student, Jordan recognized he is from the dominant culture, but he was keenly aware of the way White students dominated honors spaces. Despite his references of "Asian and Indian kids" as "the AP and honors kids," Jordan explained that the percentage of different racial groups was still low in comparison to White students in high school honors.

Jordan's comments reflect research on the ways students assign stereotypes to people of various racial groups based on their track placement (Clotfelter, 2004; Ruben et al., 2006; Tyson, 2011). Haley, who is Black, noted that in her high school honors classes you "don't see kids who look like me," which echoes Tyson's (2011) research on racialized classrooms. Considering how students see their peers within and outside of tracked classrooms—and the ways students make meaning out of their "life world" (Freire, 1985)—one can ascertain how racial stereotypes, like Jordan's comment above, can metastasize. If students do not see certain racial groups in honors classrooms, and schools are lauding honors students at assemblies as model examples, then racial stereotypes gain fuel. For example, using Jordan's observation, if at an assembly honoring honors students, most of the students are White and Asian, then students from other racial groups see that White and Asian students are academically celebrated and therefore better. This dynamic also shows how marginalized students in such an assembly can feel like they are not good enough to be celebrated.

Participants noted differing behaviors in high school non-honors and honors courses, as well as in their community college peers. In community college, non-honors students are described as "slacking about" and as those who "don't really participate." In contrast, community college honors students participate "freely" and "like being there." Community college honors students are also seen as those with their "priorities in order" and are "mature" and "focused." High school low-track students are unprepared and "hesitate to participate," while high school honors students "needed to achieve more than" and are confident, going "above and beyond." The behavior labels of high school non-honors and community college non-honors students are similar. Both higher education and secondary education students who are not enrolled in honors are also described as those who do not participate. Meanwhile, both high school and college honors students are described with behaviors linked to achievement like participation and dedication.

Table 2 is divided into four columns: high school low-track, high school honors, community college non-honors, and community college honors students. The rows are divided into label categories, including social class, intelligence, race, behaviors, and other labels. All content originates from the interviews and digital diaries recorded in this study.

The researcher intentionally left participants' names off Table 2 to demonstrate a collective voice describing the way students in tracked classrooms see their "life world" (Freire, 1985). Starting with social class, the collective voice shows participants saw students in low-track courses as "lesser" and "less affluent." It is important to note that no participants described low-track students as affluent or having resources. Additionally, participants saw honors and AP students as "middle class" and "affluent," those "having all these resources." Again, no participants described honors students as "lesser" or "less affluent." In this data, honors courses are associated with affluence while non-honors courses are associated with a lower social class.

Harmful ability stereotypes like "stupid" and "dumb" emerged when participants described low-track students' intelligence. Alternatively, honors students were described as "intelligent." We know from research that honors does not equate with intelligence (Gorski, 2018), yet we can see from the data how students assume intelligence when a student is in honors.

Tracked classrooms cause students to craft racial stereotypes from educational spaces. For example, one participant proclaimed that "there's a lot of Hispanic kids and, you know, they were never in honors," a generalization and racial stereotype formed from the student's personal observations.

Table 2. Labels Assigned to Tracks Described by Participants in Interviews and Digital Diaries

	STUDENT TYPE			
LABEL CATEGORY	**High School Low-Track Students**	**High School Honors and AP Students**	**Community College Non-Honors Students**	**Community College Honors Students**
Social class	Lesser "less affluent"	Middle class Affluent "had all these resources"		
Intelligence	Stupid Below average Dumb "dumb kid classes"	Intelligent		"obviously pretty intelligent"
Race	People of Color Minorities "There's a lot of Hispanic kids and, you know, they were never in honors."	"don't see kids who look like me" [Black/Biracial] Only one Black person in AP Lit All white White, Asian, and Indian "Like honors kids were all white or maybe there was a few, uh, African American kids like mixed in there."		"There's a lot more people of color."
Behaviors	"rejected the school" "didn't see value in it" Unprepared Immature "hesitant to participate" "didn't learn like everybody else" Troublemaker Problem kids	"needed to achieve more than"	"slacking about" "don't really participate" "in a group.... One person is doing all the work. Three of them really don't care." Not as invested	"dedicated to what they're studying" "Everyone is participating freely and everyone likes being there." Mature Focused

Appearance	"ragged backpack" "raggedy clothes" "scummy and gross"	Preppy Nerdy "Preppiness" "some cool people here and there"		
Other Labels	Troubled Crime Drugs "aren't good enough to be recognized" "slow classes" "don't deserve to be recognized" Delinquent "stupid classes"	First-Gen "Separate entity from the rest of the students" Recognized at an assembly "gonna get great jobs" "gonna go places in life" "gonna go to really good schools"	"more of a slacker vibe"	"a lot more open-minded than I might have previously thought"

If honors assemblies, for example, do not recognize Hispanic and Latino students, what will other racial groups see? When we think of Freirean meaning-making, it is troubling to consider how these students form racial stereotypes from these common conditions.

Stereotypes and negative labels for non-honors students persist in college. Participants claimed that group work in non-honors community college courses present situations where one student does all the work. Other participants described non-honors students as "slacking about," and students saw non-honors peers as "not as invested" in their learning. Meanwhile, honors students' behaviors are described as "mature" and "focused," and their classroom settings as places where "everyone is participating freely." The data show that tracking causes negative labels for non-honors students—even in college.

Most significant is the data in the Other Labels column where participants described low-track high school students as criminals. Participants used descriptors like "troubled," "crime," and "drugs" to explain low-track students, while honors students were described as a "separate entity from the rest of the students." This "separate entity" invites an illustration of a coveted, protected group of students who are sheltered from the "troubled" "criminal" population. This hierarchical structure with intelligent, affluent honors students separated from less-affluent, "stupid" low-track students is a devastating depiction of how students make meaning out of their "life-world."

How Teachers' Behaviors Impact Student Identity

Students in low-track classes internalize the hierarchical labeling found in high schools and form identities around assigned labels. Sidney described the way her high school praised honors and AP students with assemblies and loudspeaker announcements. Sidney explained in a digital diary recording the impact this high-track praise had on her and her lower-track peer group:

> [T]here's like this underlying tone, at least for me and at least for a few other people that I know, it was like, "Oh, well, yeah, they're gonna do good." But uh, you know, they're lowkey kind of like referring to the regular and the lower-level kids, like "You guys aren't good enough. You guys aren't good enough to be recognized. You guys don't deserve to be recognized. And honestly, we're not really gonna pour any of our money into these regular classes because it's not worth it because you guys don't care because you guys aren't gonna be smart anyway. So like, we're gonna pour our money only into the, quote, better or advanced courses."

By placing emphasis on how accomplished the honors students are, students who are not included in the high-track group internalize the messaging and come to understand that the school does not value them—that they won't "pour our money" into their classes. The praise honors students receive emphasizes the labels teachers assign to honors students, that they go "above and beyond," confirming the assumption that non-honors students are not doing enough. Students internalize messaging that tells them they are not good enough and not doing enough to succeed.

Amina also explained the way labels assigned to herself and her middle-track peers caused additional pressure to try to catch up with honors students. In an interview, she said this competitive labeling created hesitation among non-honors "regular" students who were afraid to provide the teacher with the wrong answer:

> Most regular students . . . tried way harder maybe because they knew they had to kind of catch up to the level of . . . their peers or whatever. So they would try harder and they would be a little more hesitant to like participate in class more openly just because they would be afraid if their answer was wrong or they would get embarrassed.

Notice how Amina calls students who are not in honors courses "regular." This label expresses the hierarchy of ability such labels create among students. Being "regular" is not as important as being "honors."

In an interview, Haley described how these external labels, like using "General" for low-track classes, impacted how she saw herself in school: "I think everybody knew that this was the dumbed down version of the class." In a digital diary recording, Amina described the impact low- and middle-track course labeling had on her identity:

> I kept thinking that if I'm in average classes, that probably means I am average, and if I cannot even perform well in average classes, then that probably means I am a below average student. That mindset and bias further kept me away from even trying to register for honors classes or even trying to think that I could be as smart as those students who do take honors classes and get straight As in them. It made me feel like I am way beneath them and that I haven't reached my full potential.

Amina's experience demonstrates how students feel inadequate when they do not excel in middle-track classes. Participants overwhelmingly expressed an awareness of the ways teachers applauded honors students with assemblies and praise while often comparing non-honors students to their high-tracked peers in a way that made students feel inferior.

LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF LABELING TRACKED STUDENTS

Not only does low-track enrollment in high school have long-term effects on a student's self-perception, it also has long-term effects on a student's mental health and self-esteem. Findings in this section reveal the ways students internalize labels associated with low- and middle-track placement and how those negative labels metastasize into adulthood. Over time, students who are "regular" come to see themselves as lesser than their peers.

Effects of High School Low-Track Placement on Mental Health

Data from the study reveal how teachers' punitive behaviors toward low- and middle-track students in high school included assumptions about intentionally choosing not to listen or try in class. In a digital diary recording, Sidney, age 26, described the long-term effects of being told in high

school that she wasn't listening or paying attention and what that meant to her mental health:

> It's just unfortunate 'cause I got told my entire high school, like, "You're not listening." "Well, you're not doing this, you're not doing this." "You're not a good student." "Maybe if you would try?" And I'm sitting there going, I'm trying, I'm trying, am trying. And then it's just discouraging because they're like, "Well, you're not trying hard enough." And it's like, no, I am. And so obviously that made me feel like, well, why should I try anyway? Because obviously my best is just not good enough. So I'm never gonna be good enough. So I think that contributed a lot to how I saw myself, now and then.

Jordan, age 21, was told that he wasn't paying attention or trying in high school, and he was later diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood. The labels assigned to Jordan in high school left a deep impact on his mental health. During an interview, he explained how he internalized the insults:

> I think that contributed to that inferiority complex of like, "I will never be a good student, so why would I even try?" Just kind of being told I'm not doing something right my whole life with this like, external factor, no one considered I think I internalized it to just reject the whole system.

Because Jordan was not excelling in high school, his teachers labeled him as "lazy" and assumed Jordan was not successful because he chose not to try. This stereotyping is harmful not only in childhood, but well into adulthood as both Jordan and Sidney show. Sidney, whose teachers claimed wasn't listening, internalized those labels as evidence that she wasn't/isn't "good enough." Jordan internalized high school labels like "lazy," ultimately rejecting school—and society—as a result of these negative stereotypes. With updated teacher professional development and better ways to diagnose attention-related disorders, it is possible that outdated and harmful labels like "lazy" have left the classrooms of our young learners; however, the only way to know how educators are addressing students is to ask our students.

Both Sidney and Jordan described the way others saw their lower-track enrollment and labeled their classes as the "dumb" ones. Jordan explained that he was seen as "stupid" because of his lower-track coursework. In a digital diary recording, he said other labels assigned to him and his friends in low-track classes had a lasting impact on him:

> You know, these sort of things that were, in hindsight, you know, childish, high schooler things. But at the same time, you know, it's a very vital part of development at that age and that time. And, yeah, definitely, I think [it] affected people, including myself.

We know students were powerless when it came to track assignment, and they were placed in environments associated with negative labels like "dumb" and "slow." The harm students endured, and continue to endure, because of negative labels like these placed on them in high school is alarming.

Internalized Feelings of Inadequacy in Honors

Without any prior experience in an honors or AP course, students taking honors in community college for the first time describe feelings of inadequacy or "imposter syndrome." Because Daniel's high school teacher referenced how most Mexican-Americans work outside, Daniel described in the interview how he continued to feel the impact of this racial stereotype as a community college honors student:

> I guess just this unsureness sometimes if I'm past my time, you know, 30 years old. I'm here in class, everyone's young. Sometimes feeling like maybe I shouldn't be in the class or something. Stuff like that. That's just me. Just gotta, I guess, be more sure of what I'm doing here. And I guess that goes back to that, those cultural barriers of like, should I really be here? I should be maybe working outside or something, you know?

Daniel internalized racial stereotypes based on educational tracking in primary and secondary school. The assumption that Daniel, a Mexican-American, should be working outside rather than pursuing academics emphasizes how Daniel recognizes racialized labels related to employment. At the beginning of this section, Jordan mentioned stereotypes about Asian-Americans excelling in math courses based on the racialized spaces in honors courses at his suburban high school. These data serve to illustrate how students' view of their place in the world can be affected by labels assigned to them in primary and secondary school.

Once enrolled in a community college honors program, Jordan struggled with his new "honors" identity. In a digital diary recording, he revealed:

> I just don't feel like that's really who I am. I don't feel like an honors student. I feel like some kind of fraud who snuck his way in, which is

> weird and illogical and, you know, definitely based on my self-esteem issues.

Echoing earlier points Jordan made about the negative labels his teachers assigned him, Jordan explains how his "self-esteem issues" cause him to feel like a "fraud" in honors courses. His ability to feel entitled to be in the program is further problematized when considering that, according to participants in this study, only a certain type of person belongs in honors courses. The fact that these students believe that only a certain type of person belongs in a high-track class is problematic and damaging.

In an interview, Sidney explained how she carried the weight of her high school teachers' words into her college classrooms:

> [T]hat's one of the main things that I struggle with now being in college and being in upper-level classes. I'm like, I shouldn't be here. I feel like I'm gonna fail. Even if I try, I'm not gonna do well. . . . I have like this fear of if I try to do these upper-level classes and I fail, it's just gonna like ingrain, like, "Oh look, my high school teachers were right. I shouldn't have gone into these classes anyway."

Data in this section show the long-term effects of ranking students and the way these students internalize feelings of inadequacy as a result. First-time honors students explain that they don't feel "part of this" and worry they will fail in honors courses. First-time honors students also describe an "unsureness" in honors courses, questioning if they should be in honors.

IDENTITIES CHANGED BY HONORS ENROLLMENT

As this section will reveal, enrolling in honors courses for the first time in community college can greatly influence a student's identity. Despite feeling inadequate upon initial entrance in honors courses, students who enroll in these classes experience a positive impact on their identities. Community college students taking honors courses for the first time describe a shift in the way they identify themselves.

Newfound Confidence

While high school low- and middle-track placement led students to feel inferior to their peers in high-track courses, once enrolled in honors, these same participants explain how their identities changed. Most participants

in the study described having newfound confidence and attention from family and friends. In a previous section, Amina explained in an interview that her high school teacher made comments to students in middle-tracked courses that led them to feel inferior to honors students. But later in a digital diary recording, she detailed how she now believes in herself because of her enrollment in honors community college classes:

> I have evolved greatly as a student from high school especially by realizing that my worth is not tied to which classes I'm taking or how advanced they are for their level. I see myself in a different light. I am aware and I realize that I can do the things that I thought in high school that I couldn't do. I can take honors classes, I can excel in honors classes, and there's nothing that I cannot do if I don't put my mind to it.

Like Amina, who used the word "evolved" to describe her growth as a student, Haley also recognized the way she "evolved" as a student, which gave her confidence and hope. By her junior year in high school, Haley determined she was not going to attend college. In a digital diary recording, she shared:

> I think the biggest part of me evolving as a student was believing in myself as being a student. . . . I'm 22 now. And I did take time out of high school to get back into it. So I think that development, that real world skill was able to give me the passion and drive. And as well as the notion for necessity—college was a necessity. Especially when you look at statistics between people who do and don't go, um, financially it's choice. But now also, I know it's the only way that I could truly pursue the career dream that I have.

In a second interview, Haley, who previously mentioned the lack of cultural capital as a reason her family did not place emphasis on college enrollment, explained the joy she felt at a family party when telling others she was enrolled in honors:

> I'm like so smart. [Laugh.] That's so fun. Um, yes. I felt smart saying it. . . . That was me with telling people that I was in an honors class and that I was playing softball again. Like I had great pride that this was part of my identity.

During an interview, Eduardo explained the way honors enrollment improved his self-confidence:

> I feel higher, like I'm doing a good job in the college—that I can be part of that society. I feel good with that. I feel, how can I say, big, I don't know. So, it is like a small form of myself that just makes me feel good.

Sidney, whose high school teachers assumed she didn't care enough to pay attention, described how she is more confident and happy as a result of being in honors classes. In her final digital diary recording, she offered more insight about her ability to make mistakes without feeling inadequate; her academic identity has evolved because of enrolling in honors classes:

> But now I'm like, you know what, we're in honors, like we're diving deep into these subjects and it's okay to make mistakes because that's how you get here and that's how you grow as a person. So I definitely see myself in a different light from high school and then to my first college and now to my second college . . . I see myself in a way better light.

Clearly Sidney "belongs" in honors courses, but her secondary school did not offer her these opportunities. Instead, the secondary education system led Sydney to feel like she was not good enough to be in school. The labels assigned to tracked classes, including honors in college, changed the way Sidney sees herself—like she's finally good enough. Likewise, when Eduardo first walked into the honors classroom, he initially doubted himself but later explained that he is "doing really good." This newfound confidence is in direct contrast with the way first-time honors students described their academic identities in primary and secondary school. Using this data helps measure how students taking honors courses for the first time develop self-confidence.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study draws attention to tensions experienced in education surrounding hierarchical structures and stratified spaces; despite the small cohort size, the study offers greater implications. First, not enough marginalized low- and middle-track high school students take honors courses in community colleges. Over 1,000 former and current Midhills Community College honors students were contacted for this study, yet only 50 of those students said they had never taken honors courses before, while also identifying as marginalized. Only 25 of the 50 community college honors students then actually qualified for the study.

Additionally, students placed in low-track courses in high school are aware of the labels assigned to them in high school, and they continue to doubt their abilities in high-achieving classrooms well beyond graduating, exhibiting "stereotype threat," which exists in academic domains when negative stereotypes about groups of people cause "fear of being reduced to those stereotypes" (Steele, 1997, p. 614). Updated research from Steele (2010) explains that stereotype threat is a "standard predicament of life" that "as members of society we have a pretty good idea of what other members of our society think about lots of things, including the major groups and identities in society" (p. 15). In other words, we label, sort, and rank people in most or all areas of society, assigning stereotypes and discriminatory identities like these students have identified. Applying Steele's (2010) recent writing to this study makes clear that when high school tracking segregates students by race or social class, negative ability-stereotypes persist in higher education—and beyond.

Labels and tracking also align with interpretations of a Foucauldian theory area described as producing learned behaviors that prepare students to mirror "society's anticipation and values" (Bogdanova & Abrosimova, 2019, p. 132). Researchers describe this disciplinary change as the result of structures in education that establish order, ranking, and usefulness (Bogdanova & Abrosimova, 2019, p. 133). Students not only see themselves as lesser when enrolled in high school lower-track classes, they also learn about society's values through tracking-specific spaces, like assemblies.

Negative Labels Assigned to Tracked Students

Unique to this study is how high school low-track students' voices were amplified to illustrate ways they internalize labels assigned to them by their peers and teachers. Labels like "scummy and gross" and appearance labels like having a "ragged backpack" remain a part of low-track students' identities well into adulthood. Two participants revealed they sought professional therapy to work through the negative labels cast upon them as children. Research confirms the way students are treated at school influences their motivation and learning (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Steele, 1997). Studies of middle school students are similar in result; students view non-honors learners as "academically slow," "bad," and "nonlearners," while honors students are "motivated, hard workers, and smart" (Legette, 2018, p. 1323).

Because they were labeled in primary and secondary school as underachieving and lazy, students in the study struggled with internalized feelings

of inadequacy. Oakes's early research on tracking illustrates that high-tracked students saw their teachers as "more concerned" and "less punitive" than low-track students (2005, p. 124). To build on Oakes's original study about the visible difference with concerned teachers in high-track courses, it is important to look at Sainio et al.'s (2023) study of Finnish students. Research on teacher-student closeness confirm that students who experience lower teacher closeness also experience boredom and "learning-related anger" (Sainio et al., 2023, p. 160). Meanwhile, students who experience close teacher-student relationships have more positive academic-related emotions (Sainio et al., 2023). Additionally, research on Australian teachers' perceptions of low-track and high-track students confirms that teachers see low-track students' abilities as more fixed, where high-track students have limitless possibilities (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). Like this study, Ladwig and McPherson (2017) found teachers describe low-track students' abilities in the same way Sidney heard her teachers describe her and her low track peers. For example, Teacher C in Ladwig and McPherson's (2017) study believes many students are not suited for school. Likewise, Sidney's teacher explained some students aren't good at math. These examples of fixed mindset illustrate ways teachers assume low-track students are trapped in this lower strata.

Data from interviews and digital diaries reveal students initially felt like they did not belong in community college honors courses because of their lack of experience in honors in high school, as well as because of being labeled as "regular," "non-honors," and low- or middle-track students. Steele's (1997) research on ability stigmatization in schools is a theoretical explanation for why students' internalized feelings of inadequacy turn into "disidentification" and "esteem-saving" rejections of the domain in which they are being stereotyped (p. 623). For example, Jordan learned how to game the system just to get by, Haley did not plan to attend college after being pushed out of AP and honors, and Daniel questioned if he should be "working outside." All of these reactions show how students in the study disidentified with school because of being placed in low- and middle-track courses.

Tracking and Identity

Even with the smaller sample size, the implications of the findings on tracking and identity help to illuminate the ways students label their peers in

tracked classrooms. Data from digital diary recordings and interviews reveal that students assign social class and ability labels to students in various tracked classrooms. Appearance labels like "scummy and gross" were assigned to low-track high school students while honors students were associated with "preppiness." Behaviors like "unprepared" were assigned to low-track students in high school, and those with a "slacker vibe" were non-honors in community college. In contrast, honors students were described as "going above and beyond" and "confident." Applying Steele's (1997, 2010) research on stereotype threat to data from this study, it is interesting to see that the labels assigned to honors students—particularly "confident"—are eventually adopted by participants in the study when they took an honors course.

Despite feeling inadequate in honors upon entrance in the classroom, a profound discovery in this study is that no matter how painful a student's secondary school experience was, including the negative impact it had on their self-confidence, enrolling in honors courses provides increased self-confidence. Simply taking an honors course at a community college allowed these students to feel they were good enough for future aspirations like transferring to a four-year university and maintaining a supportive career. The data show that the main factor in increasing self-confidence is one of domain-specific self-perception. In other words, the main benefit to first-time honors students is the self-perception of domain-specified identity; the "honors" label is associated with confidence and thereby students perceive themselves as confident. We might see this as Steele's updated insight where he notes "affirmations" and "incremental mindsets" can "deflate the threatening meaning of environmental cues" (2010, p. 137). If environmental cues about poverty from both teachers and peers initially prohibited students from their best academic performance, once those students are in a positive and affirming honors environment, previous harmful labels lose their power.

In addition, if students in this study were capable of taking honors courses in high school, as demonstrated by their success in honors courses in community college, then we see being granted access to this space and the hierarchical label can give students the confidence to succeed in honors. In fact, Karolyn Tyson (2011) notes that "increasing the competence, confidence, and comfort of black and other students of color through exposure to more rigorous curricular materials and instruction may be a particularly effective solution for narrowing the achievement gap" (p. 161). Understanding the impact of a positive and challenging learning environment, including the powerful label that aligns with superiority, can impact student success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Tracking Reform

Some education theorists recommend eliminating tracking altogether (Atteberry et al., 2019; Gorski, 2018; Oakes, 1985/2005), but it is beyond the purview of this study to suggest that one path will solve this issue. Detracking has been successful in New York: a district-wide detracking program that began in the 1990s has shown significant promise in reducing the racial achievement gap (Burris & Welner, 2005). In science courses, "after just one year of heterogeneous grouping, the passing rate for African American and Hispanic students increased from 48% to 77%, while the passing rate for white and Asian American students increased from 85% to 94%" (Burris & Welner, 2005, p. 597). Tracking reform may result in a reduction of the achievement gap between Black and White students and Hispanic and White students (Atteberry et al., 2019).

Dismantling tracked high school classrooms can put a community on edge. In several schools across the United States, conversations about detracking were met with hostile parents protecting places of privilege (Burris & Garrity, 2008; Kozol, 1992; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). At Riverview High School in Illinois, White parents responded with extreme opposition during attempts to reform and restructure the tracking system there (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Researchers describe this type of resistance as the result of parents who feel their place of privilege is threatened (DiAngelo, 2018; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). In other words, discussions about detracking led to parents claiming they didn't want a watered-down curriculum for their children, placing emphasis on what students will lose rather than focusing on what students will gain.

With the small sample size in this study, it would be overreaching to suggest that, based on the narratives of six students, we need to dismantle all high school tracking. Clearly, students thrive in an environment that promotes dialogic inquiry, independent research, global understanding, meaning-making, and research they disseminate via symposia and conferences, all things championed by honors education. School is not a one-size-fits-all environment where all students want to participate in rigorous curricula. But for those who were silenced and denied the opportunity to understand how deeply their high school courses would influence their chances at getting into a college or university, like Haley in this study, schools must educate high school students on how their course selection will impact their path to college. Educational leaders who shut certain groups

out of high-track spaces by limiting their options selectively choose who belongs in them and who does not. The barriers to college enrollment start in primary school, not with the honors curriculum inside the classroom.

Student success will increase when honors administrators lift restrictions to honors enrollment and allow students to make their own decisions about course selection. Tyson (2011) shows that "confidence gained from the gifted label itself facilitates the mobility of gifted students" (p. 160). In other words, once in honors, students have the confidence to continue to advance, whereas students who are denied access to "gifted status . . . lack exposure" to the challenging curriculum in honors courses (p. 160). Tyson notes the "psychological and social effects that persist over time" as a result of academic placement in tracked classrooms (p. 159). This study's research further supports Tyson's work illustrating how students feel fated in lower tracks. If schools do not detrack, students should be given the tools to gain access to higher-tracked classes.

Professional Development around Labeling

Because open enrollment is not yet a reality in the American educational system, and most track assignments are still made by teacher recommendations, counselors, and parental influence (Brantlinger, 2003; Hagerman, 2018; Lewis & Diamond, 2015), the next suggestion is to better prepare educators about the impact of labels on students. Unless every secondary school enforces a zero-tolerance policy for labeling students, the practice will remain. In fact, a Google search reveals that several secondary schools in Illinois were still bringing their honors students and honor roll recipients on stage and making the non-honors students watch them receive praise and rewards. The recommendation is that honors assemblies are separate functions, not mandatory all-school events. Furthermore, educators should avoid comparing the productivity of honors and non-honors classes; as this study helps to illustrate, comments about honors students' performance can negatively impact non-honors students, making them feel they do not—and may never—measure up.

As participants in this study revealed, the impact of being told they do not measure up to others and the use of labels like "lazy" make students believe they are inadequate. Freire (1970/1993) writes that "so often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, are incapable of learning anything . . . that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness" (p. 37). If educators used positive, affirming labels when addressing their students, learners would no longer internalize messages that they are

not good enough. This approach could be related to Steele's (2010) discussion on narrative intervention and various studies on that theory, where we help "to shape the narratives that stereotyped students use to interpret their experience in school" (p. 128). By "modifying the academic narratives of ability-stereotyped students" (Steele, 2010, p. 129), like those in this cohort who were labeled based on their academic track, and renaming courses to avoid hierarchical labels that indicate inferiority and superiority, we have the potential to shift how students see themselves.

Open Enrollment for Community College Students

Throughout the research and writing of this study, the researcher continued to hear students describe ways placement in tracked classrooms was outside of their control. Students do not choose their socioeconomic backgrounds, yet higher education continues to reward those in higher social classes with smoother pathways to universities and jobs (Noguera & Wing, 2006; Shavit et al., 2007). The neighborhood where a child lives, the schools they attend, and their cultural/racial identities are all outside of a student's control, yet these identities become factors for enrollment in high school high-track classrooms (Brantlinger, 2003; Clotfelter, 2004; Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Noguera & Wing, 2006; Oakes, 2005; Rubin et al., 2006). Once in higher education, particularly in open enrollment two-year colleges, students should be able to choose their academic track.

Community college honors courses could be made available to all students. The literature shows honors enrollment in community college has myriad academic benefits and contributes to success upon transfer to a university (Bowman & Culver, 2018; Chen, 2020; Cognard-Black et al., 2017; Honeycutt, 2019). If community colleges are to truly serve students who are disproportionately marginalized, then they also must provide opportunities for all students to experience an improved sense of self. All community college students should be given the opportunity to be honors students if high schools denied them this chance. This is not to say that the rigor and commitment to independent research, dialoguing, and global outreach should be reduced in honors classrooms, nor that the rigor of the curriculum should change. Rather, students who want to participate in the honors curriculum should be allowed to do so. Most open enrollment community colleges, however, do not "allow" every student the chance to walk through honors classroom doors after graduating from high school without significant barriers.

To start, community colleges can change the application process for honors enrollment to reduce barriers. On an application for the honors program in a county near Midhills, called Deerman Community College for the purposes of this essay, students complete a Google form with a few questions. While the standard criteria at Deerman is similar to Midhills's requirements for guaranteed honors admission (3.5 high school GPA, 25 ACT, or 1200 SAT, or a college GPA of 3.25), students can choose two other prompt options on the honors application. One selection indicates that the student is "not sure" if they qualify for guaranteed admission and requests a personal statement from the applicant. The other selection gives applicants the option to choose this statement: "I don't qualify for guaranteed admission, but I believe I have the potential to succeed in the Honors Program if given the opportunity." The second option demonstrates practical adherence to the idea that students who want to be in an honors program in community college *should* have the agency to do so.

Granting students opportunities to write a personal statement that explains their interest in honors is an exemplary way another Midwestern community college is reducing enrollment barriers. While this is not an absolute example of open enrollment, it is a step toward opening the honors classroom's doors to more students. An open enrollment model for honors would allow all students to self-enroll in an honors course.

Tuition Assistance for Community College Honors Students

Beyond the recommendation to remove barriers to community college honors enrollment, students need tuition assistance. As of 2024, Deerman Community College offers a tuition waiver for future honors coursework if the student maintains a 3.25 GPA and receives at least a B in one honors course. Participants in the study did not receive a scholarship to join the Midhills Honors Program, yet almost 60-percent of the honors students received merit-based tuition support from the school (Midhills R&A, Oct. 2021). Five of the six participants in this cohort enrolled in honors courses after earning a higher GPA in their first semester of community college. These students would qualify for a tuition waiver at Deerman after just one honors course if they maintained the 3.25 GPA and performed well in their honors course. A waiver like this would make a significant impact on students like Eduardo, Amina, and Haley.

Community colleges should consider how their honors requirements and scholarships act as barriers for low- and middle-track high school

students. Beyond a tuition waiver for future coursework, like Deerman Community College promotes, one recommendation is that community colleges offer scholarships for marginalized first-time honors students, which would help those who did not meet the initial honors enrollment qualifications, like high GPAs or SAT scores. Scholarships for marginalized first-time honors students would help students avoid the extra stress of working to afford tuition. Students who were kept out of colleges and universities because of merit-based requirements on scholarship or program applications could be given the chance to earn scholarships at a community college. Community college honors faculty could design application criteria for such scholarships.

More tuition assistance will help marginalized students experience the myriad benefits offered in community college honors courses. Clearly this study helps to illustrate that students gain confidence after taking a community college honors course. Because of their honors identity, students used words like "worthy," "happy," and "confident" to describe themselves. After enrolling in one honors course, Haley explained: "I had great pride that this [honors] was part of my identity." Community colleges have the opportunity to reduce barriers to honors enrollment and rewrite their students' academic narratives. With reduced barriers to community college honors course enrollment, more students will have the opportunity to experience improved self-confidence while learning in an environment that promotes Paulo Freire's concepts of meaning-making and dialogic inquiry.

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