

AN EGALITARIAN HONORS PROGRAM: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF
RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

by

Barbara Ferguson McMillan

M.A., The University of Alabama, 1986

B. A., The University of Alabama, 1982

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As I told my story in this dissertation, I mentioned many people who have brought me where I am—my parents, sister, children, a counselor, coworkers, students, and others. However, the narrative did not provide a space for three other men who belong in my personal hall of fame. They are James Harris, who taught me to take risks and work hard; my brother Taylor Ferguson who demonstrates quiet strength and courage; and my husband Bob, who has never stopped cheering for me and has provided much of the comic relief and other support that helped me stay on track throughout this process. Their contributions have been much greater than I can describe, and I thank them all.

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ABSTRACT

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Barbara Ferguson McMillan

This qualitative research study examined the lived experiences of students at a community college that has implemented an open-enrollment honors program. I surveyed high achievers who opted not to participate as well as a variety of students who had enrolled so that I could explore issues of self-efficacy in students' enrollment decisions. In addition, to understand the meaning of the program to its participants I conducted two in-depth interviews with program participants, facilitated a focus group with honors graduates, and recorded direct observations of the program in its first two years of operation. The narratives and other data generated during this study suggest that students enjoy the program and believe it is beneficial to them, which may increase engagement. In addition, it seems that because many students have not defined themselves as capable of success in an honors program, they may lack the self-efficacy required for voluntary enrollment. Their comments imply that individual encouragement from an instructor who provides accurate information about the "no-risk" aspects of the program increases the likelihood that a student will participate.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding.
Acknowledge him in all your ways and he will direct your path.”

—Proverbs 3:5

Five years ago, I would never have dreamed I would have the chance to study the honors program at Alabama Southern Community College. I was not associated with the college; besides, there was no honors program. Everyone knows that honors students do not attend “thirteenth grade,” as community colleges are often called. As I found, though, “everyone” can be wrong. How blessed I am to be able to chronicle the development of this program and explore its meanings and ramifications for the student participants, the faculty, staff, and the overall college community. The honors program at Alabama Southern Community College is nothing short of a personal mission of mine. This study is the logical next stop on a life-long journey.

The Adventure Begins

A lovely, meandering path has brought me here, one that has literally taken most of my lifetime. From my earliest memory, learning has been a pleasure. I remember, as a preschooler, sitting between my parents on a wooden pew at Greenforest Baptist Church. To help me pass the time during the seemingly interminable sermon, my mother turns to a familiar hymn—I know the words to dozens of them—and tells me which one is printed on the page. Then she has me “read” and copy the words onto the back of the church

bulletin. She writes the title in cursive, which we refer to as “real” writing, and I copy that, too. I am proud not to have to “baby write” in print. Coming as I did from a family of readers, somehow the process of decoding the printed word was never as mysterious to my siblings and me as it seemed to be to others. Because my mother stayed home, I did not attend kindergarten, yet I started school at age six already a competent reader and writer. That early advantage framed my elementary school years.

While they certainly respected formal instruction, my parents also valued other kinds of education. My mother, who did not have the opportunity to graduate from high school, is a practical and analytical woman who sets much more store in applied than in theoretical knowledge. Daddy did not have a college degree, but he was well spoken and well read, able to hold his own in any company. He used his exceptional intelligence to solve practical problems, and he was a model of what is now termed emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Thus, he was ideally suited to his career as an electronics engineer and salesperson.

My parents were advocates of experiential learning without ever knowing that that approach has a name. One way that they communicated this attitude was through our family vacations. These could happen in any season, for my father firmly believed in taking us on trips whether or not there was a school break on the calendar. He thought we could learn more by traveling with him than we would at school on any given day, anyway. The sights and sounds and ideas we shared during those times together clearly set the stage for my attitudes about the value of *in vivo* educational experiences.

My sister was another powerful force in the universe of my childhood. I tried to keep up with her, though she was five and a half years my senior and five grades ahead of

me in school. She was so smart and she knew so much! She was always coming home full of information I lacked. It seemed to me that she knew about essentially everything. She read voraciously and was a budding artist to boot. Her posters and reports and projects were, to my admiring eyes, astonishingly complex and beautiful. I wanted to match her accomplishments. I remember when she won a ribbon at a school art show. I was both proud and jealous. I absorbed science and social studies from her, and I tried to read as much as she did. One way or another, my whole family contributed to my academic success.

Of course, my preschool and extracurricular life does not tell the whole story. Throughout elementary and secondary school, I was blessed with teachers who had high expectations for me. I was in the top reading and math groups from the very beginning. I remember being thoroughly excited by activities such as winning multiplication speed drills, reading more Science Research Associates (SRA) stories than anyone else, and earning “extra credit” by memorizing poems as well as drawing and coloring maps and flags. I was identified for inclusion in a program for “gifted” students. I was absolutely delighted; the program was fun. When we moved to Foley, Alabama, in 1975, though, there was no similar program. In fact, the school lagged so far behind those in Florida that I was “double-promoted.” Yet in Foley I met the person who had the most profound effect on my trajectory after high school.

The first person I remember meeting at Foley High School was the guidance counselor, Mrs. Sybil Underwood. For reasons unknown to me, she took a special interest in my success. Mrs. Underwood asked me to check in with her from time to time during

my new-kid first semester in high school. I was a full year younger than my classmates, so she wanted to make sure I was connecting with my peers.

Our most important encounter took place on the morning when the Preliminary Scholastic Achievement Test/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT/NMSQT) was to be given at our school. Right before the test, Mrs. Underwood saw me walking in the hallway. She asked why I was not in the cafeteria for the test. When I told her I was not planning to take it, she informed me in no uncertain terms that I was indeed going to take the test, for high scores on it, she said, could open doors for me later. I had no idea that it was particularly important, and I told her so. She said she would take care of the fee and the registration, and she walked me into the testing room and got me registered. Some weeks later, I was summoned to the principal's office. The scores had come in and I had the highest one in our school. I was, in fact, a National Merit Semifinalist. Ultimately, I was a National Merit Scholar. Mrs. Underwood had been right. That test, and Mrs. Underwood's mentoring, have had lasting repercussions for me.

Further along the Path

As the mother of two unusually bright, uncommonly motivated students of my own, I have needed to be persuasive and persistent to create opportunities for them to flourish in an innovation-poor environment within the Monroe County school system. Monroeville, our community, is in the heart of rural southwest Alabama, roughly a two hour drive to any city of significant size. This unlikely location holds the designation "Literary Capital of Alabama." It is the birthplace of the legendary Nelle Harper Lee,

author of Pulitzer prize-winning *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Truman Capote summered here as a child, and other lesser luminaries have called Monroeville home, as well. Despite the area's rich literary heritage, the Monroe County education system is not particularly noteworthy. In 2006, two of its public schools failed to meet federal criteria for adequate yearly progress (AYP). Neither of its two private schools is impressive academically.

My daughter described the situation from her point of view in a scholarship essay:

During high school, I was amazed by the dearth of opportunities for academically talented students in my school system. Only one Advanced Placement class was offered in the entire county, available at only one of the seven high schools. No school offered math beyond pre-calculus, and there were few electives. Motivated students had the option, at their own expense, to supplement their curriculum with extra courses during the summer, requiring travel of over 150 miles roundtrip; to add community-college courses to a full high school load; or to take accredited correspondence courses. These opportunities helped those who could afford them, but almost half of the system's families had incomes so low that the students qualified for free meals.

This situation begged for a remedy, so on my daughter's behalf, I approached school officials. At that time I was an administrator at the local public mental health center, so I was used to dealing with bureaucracy and nay-saying. The first concession was that the school provided an independent study format for required, standard-level social science courses. This arrangement let my daughter complete junior and senior-year requirements in one year, leaving her free to pursue other interests. She was also the first

student to participate in a newly initiated dual enrollment program with Alabama Southern Community College.

The dual enrollment contract between the College and the school system, which allowed substitution of college work for high school credits, was written to accommodate her needs at my husband's and my urging. Previously no parent or educator had taken the lead in pressing for such an arrangement. The program, now in its sixth year, is available in several public schools in the area, with roughly 40 high school students dual enrolled during any given semester.

The most recent leg of my journey ensued when I left public mental health to begin teaching psychology and sociology at a community college in August 2002. In May 2006, the president of the college mentioned, as he passed me in the hall, that because of a recent conversation with a colleague from a nearby university, he was considering the possibility of an honors program for our students. Knowing that I have a long-standing commitment to this area, he wondered what I thought. I assured him students would likely participate and such a project would be worthwhile. A few days later, he broached this idea again, and once more I expressed enthusiasm. Before the week ended, he asked me to direct the new program. With that, the honors program at Alabama Southern Community College was born.

Alabama Southern Community College is a small school in rural south Alabama. As with most public community colleges in North America, it has an open-enrollment policy. Such policies make higher education accessible to students unable to qualify for competitive admissions institutions. Open enrollment allows, among other things,

academic upward mobility for students who decide to take education seriously after lackluster high school performance. I will further describe the college in Chapter 3.

Theoretical Perspectives

Qualitative research requires approaching social phenomena from multiple perspectives. The mark of excellence in such research is predicated not upon control and the establishment of cause and effect relationships, but rather upon triangulation. Theory triangulation, informing the design and analysis of the outcomes from multiple theoretical perspectives, is essential to qualitative inquiry.

Throughout my doctoral coursework, I have gravitated toward symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. In addition, my training in clinical psychology predisposes me to delve into the how's and why's of individual behavior. I have a predominantly cognitive-emotional approach to therapy, and I lean toward a social learning theory of personality development. More and more, I consider behavior from a social cognitive perspective. These theoretical perspectives inform my work.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on social interactions and their meanings for participants. Its main idea, originating with philosopher and social theorist George Herbert Mead and expanded by Herbert Blumer, is that meanings emerge out of social contact, and especially through communication. Schwandt (2001) summarizes the three basic premises of symbolic interactionism:

First, humans act toward the objects and people in their environment on the basis of the meanings these objects and people have for them. Second, these meanings derive from the social interaction (communication, broadly understood) between

and among individuals. Communication is symbolic because we communicate through language and other symbols and in communicating create significant symbols. Finally, meanings are established and modified through an interpretive process undertaken by the individual actor (p. 245).

Inquiry, from this point of view, requires the researcher to seek to understand “by first actively entering the setting or situation of the people being studied to see their particular definition of the situation, what they take into account, and how they interpret this information” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 245).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) draw on and further elaborate the processes whereby all types of knowledge, including personal identity, are formed through social interactions. In their classic *The Social Construction of Reality* they write, “Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world” (p. 19). This coherent world of everyday life is experienced “as an intersubjective world” (p. 23), that is, a world shared with fellow observers with whom interaction occurs. Essentially, because instincts in humans are relatively absent, there is wide variation in behavior and environment. Social order is no naturally occurring phenomenon, but rather is built through human activity and interaction. Because of the aforementioned lack of instincts, human beings require social order for their effective functioning. Social order becomes institutionalized when collectively habituated actions become part of the *stock of knowledge*, comprising the shared, culturally specific understandings of reality. Institutionalization establishes predictability about what actions will be done by whom under what circumstances. It is a precondition of successful socialization, the process by which identity is formed. Berger and Luckmann

(1966) say, “Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations” (p. 173). In short, knowledge, meanings, and identities are collateral products of social interactions.

Let us move now from the sociology of knowledge to the psychology of human motivation and social learning theory. Social learning theory is most closely associated with social psychologist Albert Bandura, who sought to explain human behavior that diverged from psychoanalytic behaviorist models. Prior to Bandura, two widely accepted theories of human personality and behavior predominated. The psychoanalytic explanation generally explained in terms of needs, drives, and impulses that most often operated below the level of conscious awareness. The behaviorist perspective proposed that all human actions occurred strictly because of learned associations between stimuli and responses that linked intentional behavior directly to the environment. Bandura more or less ignored the notion of the unconscious, but he asserted that the relationship between the environment and behavior was more complex than a simple stimulus-response connection. He theorized that while the environment influences behavior, behavior in turn influences the environment. This relationship is called *reciprocal determinism*. Later, he added a third element to the equation, stating that behavior, the environment, and the individual’s mental processes are equally important in both the short run of situational behavior and the long run of personality (Bandura, 1977).

Current social cognitive theorists focus on human agency in connection with personality development and behavior (Bandura, 1986, 2001, 2006). Agency implies the actors’ intentional, significant influence upon their own functioning and situations. In his words, “People are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. They

are not simply onlookers of their behavior. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them” (Bandura, 2006, p. 3). Observational learning and the notion of self-efficacy figure prominently in such theorizing (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is sometimes described as a “can-do attitude.” More formally, it may be conceptualized as a person’s mental model of personal effectiveness in a given situation. Bandura (1995) says, “Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 2). As such, self-efficacy influences people’s choices, the amount and type of effort they put forth, how likely they are to persist in the face of obstacles or failure, and how they feel about their efforts, their performance, and even themselves. Self-efficacy is a characteristic that, like most if not all, falls along a continuum. There are people who generally approach difficult tasks as challenges to be met, while others see them as obstacles to be avoided.

However, self-efficacy is also situation specific. Someone may have high self-efficacy in one area, low in another. In the past few days, for example, I have attended an academic awards presentation, a musical performance, and two athletic events. Each event spotlighted particular types of accomplishments. Some students have succeeded in all three arenas, some in one or two, others in none. While there may be innate differences in ability, it seems apparent that the willingness to try, to improve, to practice, to study, and to outlast the competition, are also factors in students’ successes across the various venues.

Self-efficacy alone is an insufficient predictor of behavior. Bandura (1997) asserts that individual decisions about behavior are moderated by how much a person believes a specific action will pay off. In other words, I may believe myself able to succeed at a

particular activity but choose not to do it because I see no value in it. However, if I do not believe I can be successful, I am unlikely to try, regardless of how worthwhile the activity may seem. Students' perceptions of the value of participation in the honors program are, therefore, of great importance.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of what it means to be an honors student at Alabama Southern Community College. I want to discover what students believe about the value of the honors program. I also want to explore issues of agency in identity development. After all, "everyone" knows that honor students do not attend community college. But maybe the students who do what it takes to complete the honors program know better.

Perhaps because many policy makers buy into the myth that community college students are incapable of high academic achievement, only a few honors programs exist in rural community colleges in the south. Even fewer let students decide, regardless of previous academic success or test scores, whether to become honor students. This program rests upon such an egalitarian philosophy. For students to make the decision to participate, especially in the face of having come to college underprepared, entails personal risk. I want to find out about their decision-making processes under such circumstances.

Community college students are often the victims of stereotypes and can easily fall prey to the tyranny of low expectations. While I do not believe that post-secondary policy makers, administrators, or instructors intentionally prevent students from attaining

their potential, it is likely that community college environments are typically instrumental in promoting or reinforcing low self-efficacy. They may also typically impart the message that since they are merely community college students, intense effort is likely wasted. That is, students often get the implicit message that passing their classes is sufficient. Conjointly, if they were interested in learning for its own sake, or for excellence in education, they should not be attending a community college. Mediocrity is unfortunately not only tolerated, but often expected. So, only unusual individuals are willing to take on more than is required. Such students apparently want to influence their environment, and, in the process, they may change the meaning of their experiences as students.

I plan to explore these matters by examining the experiences of some Alabama Southern Community College students who have had the opportunity to participate in the program. By listening to their voices, I hope to understand their lived experiences sufficiently to guide program designers and administrators in giving motivated students what they need and want in an honors program. I also hope to have a better understanding of student self-efficacy in connection with students' decisions about program participation.

The following are my main research questions:

1. What are the participants' stories of their most satisfying and most frustrating experiences in the program?
2. What do students say about their reasons for participating?
3. What are some reasons students with histories of high academic achievement give for not to participating?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Words acquire their meanings through usage. For this reason, misunderstanding easily occurs between people who use the same words but who intend to convey different meanings. Similarly, people acquire their identities through social interactions, and words are essential elements of those encounters. From this perspective, it makes no sense to expect that there is a single definition or program description that captures the meaning of the terms *honors program*, *honor student*, or, for that matter, *community college student*.

In the tradition of Berger and Luckmann, Searle (1995) reminds us in *Construction of Social Reality* that facts and definitions exist because people have a shared belief in them and agree among themselves to accept them as correct. From this perspective, institutions such as the family, religion, education, and government are systems of shared meanings that guide and constrain human behavior. The heart and soul of this study is in exploring the processes by which these meanings develop and the effects that they have upon individual students in the specific setting of the Alabama Southern Community College honors program, which is situated in time, place, and context. Some related phenomena are briefly considered here.

Pre-College Honors Programs

“Honor students” and “intellectually gifted students” are generally interchangeable terms in primary and secondary schools. This common understanding is

disputed (Winner & Karolyi, 1998), but the belief persists. Educators tend to believe qualities that render individuals worthy of inclusion in special honors programs are readily apparent to observers. For this reason, policy may require that students are tapped for special classes by school personnel and qualify for inclusion by high scores on an individually administered IQ test or by an exemplary academic record or demonstration of some special skill. Once again, the notion is that special benefits follow individual merit. However, placement decisions are not clearly linked to personal performance or aptitude, but instead tend to “result from the synergy of three powerful factors: differentiated, hierarchical curriculum structures; school cultures alternatively committed to common schooling and accommodating differences; and political actions by individuals within those structures and cultures aimed at influencing the distribution of advantage” (Oakes & Guiton, 1995, p. 3). Indeed, Oakes, Rogers, and Lipton (2006) describe the typical American public high school as effectively two schools in one, with students offered very different trajectories yielding vastly divergent lived experiences both during and after high school. This is likely the case in large schools; however, in many small rural schools, no students have the opportunity to enhance their academic records in ways that make them competitive.

In schools which offer honors programs, the designation and its related rewards are often limited to so-called academic courses, including mathematics, laboratory sciences, and English, but excluding many other courses. The arts are generally not included. Workinger (1993) discusses a rationale for developing subject-specific honors courses in order to allow students to earn an equivalent “weighted GPA credit” in the arts. He notes that “high school has become quite a competitive place. Students look for

ways to raise their grade point averages to improve their range of college acceptances” (p. 29). In the world in which he teaches, “academic departments compete for slots in student schedules by offering novel electives, a range of required courses, and various honors and advanced-placement classes” (p. 29), and he asserts that a music honors program can help keep students interested in the arts while addressing these realities. His program requires application, audition, approval by the music faculty, and finally a performance contract. Worker’s world, though, is not the one commonly experienced by a great number of high school students (Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006).

Winebrenner (2006) notes that there is an emerging trend toward open enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and other honors classes previously limited to high achievers. There is a great deal of resistance among educators, many of whom believe that it will dilute the programs and reduce the rigor of the courses and, therefore, render them useless.

Students who have been exposed at an early age to high academic expectations and experiences are much more likely than others to set high academic goals for themselves. In addition, they are much more likely to have the foundational skills needed to continue to achieve at a high level they are also better equipped with the implicit knowledge required to overcome the non-academic barriers, thereby persisting until graduation. They are also more likely both to be chosen and then to choose to participate in collegiate honors programs.

Collegiate Honors Programs

Collegiate honors programs come in many shapes and sizes. It is the rare four-year college or university that does not have some special programming designated as honors. Honors may be awarded at the course, department, school or division, or institution level. For various reasons, colleges and universities compete for academically talented students by creating honors programs (Seifert, Pascarella, Colangelo, & Assouline, 2007; Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995; Byrne, 1998). The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) provides guidelines for honors programs as well as full-fledged honors colleges operating within the larger institution. These guidelines acknowledge that there is no standard configuration that is superior to all others but suggest some best practices (NCHC, 2007).

Both two- and four-year colleges and universities organize their programs in various ways, with or without regard for the NCHC guidelines. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) website, some programs require a mix of honors with regular classes; others require that students take all of their classes within the honors college. In addition, entrance requirements vary as well. NACAC notes that

Each honors program has its own entrance requirements, but in general, you need high grades and test scores. Some programs issue invitations to all incoming freshmen who meet their requirements; other programs require separate applications. High grades in your first year of college could also qualify you for some honors programs....Most honors programs also require participants to

maintain above-average grades while in college to remain in the program. (Gross, 2003, para. 5).

Many programs feature special housing, advising, and mentoring opportunities as incentives for students to enroll in honors courses. These benefits are consistent with NCHC's recommendations for fully-developed honors programs, and especially for fully-developed honors colleges. For example, the NCHC website (2007) recommends both "special academic counseling of honors students by uniquely qualified faculty and/or staff personnel," (para. 13) and, "where the home university has a significant residential component, the fully developed honors college should offer substantial honors residential opportunities" (para. 28).

Despite what may seem like an opportunity that any student would want to pursue, significant marketing and publicity efforts are expended in recruiting participants. Typical program descriptions explain to students that participation at any level is beneficial, and honors courses on their transcripts signal initiative and motivation to potential employers, graduate schools, and scholarship committees. Many honors programs offer financial incentives as well, or require scholarship recipients to participate in the school's honors programs. Few institutions of higher learning rely upon the intrinsic benefit of the honors experiences to draw students. Although involvement is often in their best interest, many students shy away. Kuh (2007) notes that first year students generally "don't do optional" (p. B13).

But perhaps they really should. Seifert, et al. (2007) investigated the impact of honors programs on student experiences of good practices and on their cognitive development in the first year of college. They found that honors program students

benefited in development of several aspects of cognitive development and that they experienced more of the good practices than did non-honors peers. The resume' building aspects of earning honors diplomas is another important consideration.

Community College Honors Programs

The notion of a community college honor student is, to many, an irreconcilable paradox (Galinova, 2005). Historically, four-year universities, especially private institutions, have been believed to attract the best prepared and most capable students, with public universities drawing the next tier, and community colleges bringing up the rear (Berger, 2007; Hugo, 2007). As community colleges have an open enrollment policy, there are many students benefiting from their services who do not meet the minimal entrance requirements for most other post-secondary institutions. Many of those less-prepared students are involved in certification courses in a vocational program or are learning specific skills in a non-credit continuing education course. Such services are available through community colleges which have been charged with meeting the varied educational needs of their communities.

Many, however, are working to remediate reading, writing, or mathematics skills necessary for success in collegiate-level work prior to attempting transferable credit courses. This practice is not without its critics, as historically there has been disagreement about who is entitled to a college education, and that philosophical discussion is still ongoing. Community colleges are based upon the egalitarian idea that higher education should be equally accessible without regard to prior academic preparation, socioeconomic status, race, sex, or even ability (e.g., Cohen, & Brawer, 2003). Gandara

(2002) notes specific factors in K-12 schools that contribute to a student's being ill-prepared for college-level work upon graduation from high school. These include inequalities in instructional offerings, quality of teachers, segregation of minority students within and between schools, poor counseling, and subtle but well-communicated low expectations and aspirations. In addition, she identifies other non-ability-related issues that reduce the likelihood of high academic achievement; these include lack of peer support, limited parental financial resources, and inequalities in cultural and social capital. While community colleges cannot overcome all of these obstacles, they give students an opportunity for non-punitive remediation. With the primary institutional focus on teaching and learning rather than on research, community college classrooms are ideal settings for many underprepared students.

In addition, though, many students attend community colleges for reasons besides their lack of selectivity. Academically successful students may choose community college because of financial constraints, location, family responsibilities, or even because of the reputation of a program offered by the college. Floyd and Holloway (2007) say it this way:

Historically, community colleges have emphasized their societal missions of egalitarianism and open access as integral curricular components. As open admissions colleges, these institutions have been challenged to prepare a wide variety of students with an equally wide variety of reasons for enrolling. Because they are place-bound or have limited finances, some students may choose a community college for their first two years of the baccalaureate. Others who are academically underprepared for college opt to complete developmental classes at

the community college, hoping to transfer to a university after finishing such studies. Many more students choose the community college as an avenue to prepare for the world of work through workforce and technical training. Over time, however, community colleges have expended their curricular foci to include other priorities. One such priority is programming for the academically gifted and ambitious. Through the functional mission of offering honors courses and programs, the community college addresses its societal mission of egalitarianism by ensuring that all people have equal access to educational opportunities at all academic levels. (p. 43)

Given an open-enrollment policy and an egalitarian access philosophy, introducing honors programs at community colleges has received a mixed response. Critics take the position that honors programs are by definition elitist. Kane (2001) states that many college administrators used acronyms or titles such as “scholars programs” to defuse criticism. Bulakowski and Townsend (1995) report that community college honors students and faculty enjoyed and benefited from such programs, but they are nonetheless “criticized as representing elitist attitudes antithetical to the community college mission” (p. 488).

Byrne (1998) examined reasons given by community college administrators about why they have honors programs, what the stated goals are for the programs, how their honors curricula are structured, and whether the programs succeed in meeting stated goals. He reviewed information about honors programs and curricula in 38 community colleges and districts in 19 states from a 24-year period (1974 to 1998) and concluded that commonly stated goals are to encourage success specifically among excellent

students and to promote a general atmosphere of excellence. He further states that “few published reports provide longitudinal data on honors program effectiveness but rely on data from student questionnaires that indicate high satisfaction levels” (p. 67).

Despite the realities that transferable community college courses are indeed taught at the collegiate level and that many students are capable and motivated, commonly held perceptions of community colleges as offering watered-down versions of “real” college courses persist. Urso and Sygielski (2007) say,

Today’s community college participants—the administration, faculty, staff, and the student population—are charged with raising the bar. For some students, this involves changing the expectation that the curriculum at the community college does not parallel the education available at the four-year schools. For the majority of students, this challenge also involves improving the expectations that the students have of themselves. (para. 34)

Building academically rigorous honors programs is one approach to changing these perceptions.

Successful Community Colleges

A common criterion for measuring the success of a community college is retention or persistence rate, the proportion of students who continue to take classes until they earn a degree or certificate. Hoyt (1999) states that the retention rate for community colleges cannot reasonably be measured in the 4-6 year time-frames often used. Because of the special circumstances of community college students, a nine-year time frame is more appropriate. Academic underpreparation lengthens the road to graduation as students may need to complete non-credit developmental classes for remediation. Less-

prepared students are also more likely to withdraw or fail classes that then must be repeated. Another contributing factor is a lack of financial resources. Many students take less than a full load of classes because of tuition expenses and other budgetary constraints. Community college students often work full- or part-time while attempting to complete their degrees. They are also more likely than university students to be raising children or to have other major family responsibilities.

Another useful benchmark for evaluating a community college might be the percentage of its associate's degree recipients who enter expressing an intention to transfer who actually complete a baccalaureate degree. The transfer function is, of course, a central pillar of community college curricula (e.g., Tinto, 1993). Research in the late 1980s (e.g., Dougherty, 1987) indicated that entering community college might hinder the completion of a four-year degree. However, current data suggests that transfer students holding associate's degrees are essentially identical to so-called native students in graduation percentage.

In addition, many students enter community colleges with no intention to complete. Tinto (1993) notes that "in a given year, approximately 17 percent will not enroll in degree-credit programs. Many will be part-time students who take a variety of courses unrelated to any coherent degree program" (p. 8). He notes that this is especially common in community colleges. In addition, "some persons enter institutions of higher education with the explicit intention of departing prior to degree completion in order to transfer to another institution" (p. 39). In such cases, "departure from their initial institution of registration reflects their efforts to achieve that goal" rather than a failure of the student or the institution (p. 40). Bers and Smith (1991) concur that non-persistence

should not always be counted as negative, and can actually indicate successful goal attainment for some students. They suggest, then, that the students' actual intentions be taken into account, rather than applying arbitrary criteria. Bailey, Jenkins, and Leinbach (2005) aptly state that

Policymakers should not condemn colleges merely because of low graduation rates, especially if there are questions about the accuracy of the data. Neither, though, should colleges be complacent about their graduation rates, because they believe that students are getting what they want, however low their goals are, or because that is the best that they can do given all of their difficult problems to solve. (para. 35)

Kuh (2007) notes that the demand for college-educated workers is growing while stakeholder complaints about the inadequacy of student skills and academic preparation is increasing. As noted previously, thousands of students face challenges related to socioeconomic background, financial resources, college readiness, and emotional support that tend to impede their progress toward earning a desired degree. Given this context, a review of current research reflects that “surprisingly little attention focuses on what higher-education institutions can do to help students survive and thrive in college” (p. 1). Most of the existing literature relating to retention and attrition of community college students dates from the late 1990s.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) propose seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education “intended as guidelines... to improve teaching and learning....They rest on 50 years of research on the way teachers teach and students learn, how students work and play with one another, and how students and faculty talk to

each other” (p. 1). Briefly stated, the successful educator seeks to encourage contacts between students and faculty, develops reciprocity and cooperation among students, uses active learning technique, gives prompt feedback, emphasizes time on task, communicates high expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. These principles, which apply to community colleges as well as four-year institutions, have been revisited, adapted, and related to prediction of individual graduation rates, evaluation of institutional retention and attrition, and development of academic programs. There are an astonishing number of websites that reference or reprint the Seven Principles document.

Taking a different approach, Tinto (1993) examines the reasons for college attrition and finds that dropout decisions at all post-secondary institutions are generally the result of inadequate academic integration, marked by poor grades, poor attendance, and self-assessed failure to develop intellectually as a result of college enrollment; or in social integration, marked by low participation in extracurricular activities, few friendships, and little non-academic contact with faculty. Students who attend community colleges tend to be at high risk in all of these areas. Small wonder then that a number of studies have found that student attrition is higher in two-year than in four-year colleges (e.g., Mohammadi, 1994). The most telling reason is generally regarded to be the community college’s inability to successfully integrate students into a fully developed community.

Recognizing the need to reduce attrition, community colleges have implemented numerous programs to help students meet educational goals. Beatty-Guenter (1994) reviewed the literature and proposed a typology of retention strategies for minority at-risk

students in community colleges. She does not evaluate effectiveness, but rather classifies programs into those which sort students into homogeneous subgroups, support students in dealing with life's problems or responsibilities, connect students with one another and with the institution, or transform students and the community college.

Student engagement, which comprises individual effort, involvement, and time and energy devoted to studying and other college-based activities, is an important factor in academic success and eventual graduation (Kuh, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Kuh (2007) suggests six steps for improving student engagement:

1. Teach first-year students as early as possible how to use college resources effectively. A brief advising session and welcome/orientation are not generally sufficient, especially for first-generation college students and other vulnerable students.
2. Make the classroom the locus of community. Meaningful interactions with faculty, often occurring during class discussions and other cooperative learning experiences, are critical for teaching institutional values and academic norms.
3. Develop networks and early-warning systems to support students when they need help. This may be thought of as intrusive, but monitoring and intervening when attendance or grades indicate a student is foundering increase student persistence rates.
4. Connect every student in a meaningful way with some activity or positive role model. Even simple strategies such as having faculty taking class time to encourage students to become involved in campus life can make a difference.

5. If a program or practice works, make it widely available. Rather than having programs strictly for honors students or student-government leaders that include only a small portion of the student body, an open-enrollment or even mandatory enrollment may be the preferred mode of delivery.
6. Remove obstacles to student engagement and success. Bureaucratic red tape is an avoidable barrier to student success.

Formal mentoring can be used to increase student engagement. Stromei (2000) finds that mentoring, particularly career-related, and psychosocial mentoring that increased tacit knowledge, increases retention among minority students. Tacit knowledge is transmitted from mentor to student by observation, imitation, and practice within the mentoring relationship. The skills absorbed in this manner tend to increase the likelihood of retention. Honors programs can be vehicles through which to deliver many, if not all, of the elements that have been identified with student success.

The Making of an Honors Program

Social institutions, including education, are systems of shared meanings, beliefs, and norms that guide and constrain human behavior (Galinova, 2005; Scott, 2001; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1994; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Galinova finds that some of the most salient meanings and beliefs have gained essentially indisputable authority and that meritocracy, the belief that opportunity should be and is distributed according to personal merit, is one such taken-for-granted ideology that is the bedrock of education in the United States. However attractive this idea may be, though, merit is not the only basis upon which rewards are distributed. Rosenbaum (1986) says that what is deemed

praiseworthy “is in part a social status conferred to individuals based upon a multitude of social cues, including cues derived from individuals’ positions in institutional career structures” (p. 140). If rewards were strictly distributed by merit, motivated, capable people from every social category should be proportionately represented in the upper echelon. That this is not the case indicates that our educational system is “a quasi-meritocracy, more successfully reproducing than counteracting old inequalities” (Galinova, 2005, p. 23).

The finite resources available in every society are often distributed according to arbitrary, socially defined characteristics such as gender, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. The basis for distribution is cultural notions about the worth of the individual (Galinova, 2005). When members of one category enjoy unearned privileges, members of other groups incur relative deprivation. Even verbiage in the federal No Child Left Behind legislation acknowledges that some categories of children are educationally disadvantaged relative to others. Whether it is reasonable to expect to eliminate differences in individual outcomes is a debate for another venue. The likelihood that the Bush administration will succeed in leveling the playing field is suspect—its approach seems more likely to murder public education—but it is difficult not to support this as a worthy goal. Reproduction theory suggests that schools are microcosms of the societies that create and sustain them, and they often reproduce societal inequalities through internal policies and practices. Opportunities are often parceled out using criteria that reward privileged students.

The relationship between social status and educational success is complex and often circular. Parental income is an excellent predictor of children’s educational

attainment, and educational attainment is an excellent predictor of later socioeconomic status. In practical terms, this means that children often find themselves following in their parents' socioeconomic footsteps. Galinova (2005) cites "plentiful research findings about the strong positive relationship between the students' social background and different markers of their educational careers (e.g., their perceived academic ability, their college choice and self-selection, and the quality of the colleges they attend)" (p. 1). This is referred to as *cultural reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 2001).

Examples of cultural reproduction at school are common. Tracking students into low-, average-, and high-level classes based on prior academic performance tends to result in segregation by class and ethnicity (Oakes, 1985; Oakes, Gamoran & Page, 1992). Another example of this tendency is the practice of providing advanced placement (AP) and other types of accelerated or enriched curricula to students in wealthier school systems while failing to provide them in poorer areas. Children from higher socioeconomic status homes with generally better-educated parents thus have access to college preparation that less privileged children rarely receive. Some believe that school choice will correct this inequality, but parents are often unwilling or unable either physically or psychologically to send their children to schools far away from their neighborhoods in order to gain resources. Practical concerns such as time, transportation, and expense tend to trump academic opportunity for many poor families. In addition, even in schools that offer such classes, minority students are underrepresented (Mathews, 1998).

The availability of AP courses and other specialized programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) high schools favor children from some schools and

districts over others. However, many more subtle aspects of education favor middle and upper class students (DiMaggio, 1982). For example, Lareau (1987) finds that school personnel in systems serving lower-class and those serving middle-class families have similar expectations for parental involvement. However, social and cultural circumstances provide different opportunity for parents to comply with those expectations. Such systematic differences are referred to as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977/1990). Giroux (2001) describes the power of schools to perpetuate the *status quo* by “promot[ing] inequality in the name of fairness and objectivity” (p. 88).

Whether explicitly stated or not, honors programs are based upon and thus reflect an educational philosophy. Galinova (2005) says that honors programs are agents of differentiation and stratification. Specifically, “contingent upon their definition of the meritorious or the ‘honors’ student, they may or may not construct considerable gatekeeping mechanisms and thus constitute their own ‘elite’ group of students” (p. 7).

Sometimes the underlying ideas are clearly articulated in the program description. Sometimes, developers and administrators make decisions that just make sense to them, and the resulting creation reveals the creators’ mental constructs. Once the initial policies and procedures are developed and imposed and students begin to participate, the program becomes a vehicle of social interaction. Implicitly or explicitly, philosophy informs design, design shapes practice, and practice becomes institutionalized. Depending upon the program parameters and the extent of the administrative oversight, the program’s actual form and the resulting student experiences may vary little or enormously from the original plan. Either way, the resulting lived experiences shape the meaning of “honors programs” for participants as well as observers.

The value of being referred to as an honors student is thus constructed and conferred. When students do the activities and exhibit the skills desired by the academic institution, they receive this label. Once called an honor student, expectations begin to accrue from without and within. It is used as a descriptor as though its meaning is obvious. Generally, there is a relationship between the earning of high grades and the designation as an honors student. For example, grades are the major consideration in selection for National Honor Society. Opponents of honors programs often complain that they are elitist, repeatedly rewarding students and essentially punishing others for their intellectual capabilities. Indeed, some programs have elements that earn this criticism. However, if an egalitarian philosophy undergirds the structure and implementation, honors programs can benefit deserving, capable students who are usually overlooked, giving them opportunities to build their resumes in order to become more competitive at the higher education table.

Finally, there must be some perceived benefit to the community college, too, or administrators would not welcome the controversy and additional effort and expense connected with supporting an honors program. Burnett (2005) notes that honors programs assist community colleges to attract bright students who might have bypassed them. They also “give lower-ability students role models on their own campus, help build relationships with the four-year schools to which many honors students transfer and, by sponsoring book readings or public speakers, they provide a healthy dose of positive publicity” (p. 10).

The Making of an Honors Student

Success follows success both in school and otherwise. Many interacting factors influence academic performance. Besides individual neurological information-processing capabilities, early experiences and other sociocultural dynamics play a role. Bandura examined the relationship between person, situation, and cognition as a major influence on behavior. He called the product of these interacting factors *self-efficacy*. Of the cognitive portion of this relationship, Pajares (1997) says

The process of creating and using beliefs is simple enough and rather intuitive: individuals engage in a behavior, interpret the outcomes of their actions, use the interpretations to develop beliefs about their capability to engage in subsequent behaviors in similar domains, and behave in concert with the beliefs created. In school, for example, the beliefs that students develop about their academic capabilities help determine what they do with the knowledge and skills they possess. Consequently, their academic performances are in large part the result of what students actually come to believe that they have accomplished and can accomplish. This helps explain why students' academic performances may differ markedly when they have similar ability. This is a view consistent with that of scholars and theorists who have long argued that the potent evaluative nature of beliefs makes them a filter through which new phenomena are interpreted and subsequent behavior mediated. (p. 3)

Self-efficacy is a task-specific personal judgment of competence. Unlike self-esteem, self-efficacy is not an emotional reaction to actual accomplishments, nor is it a generalized belief about overall competence. Self-efficacy is better characterized by the

statement, "I can understand the symbolism in *Pilgrim's Progress*" than by a more general, "I am a good reader." Silver, Smith and Green (2001) find that a self-efficacy rating scale differentiated between students who self-reported academic success or failure. Several researchers have reported that self-efficacy affects academic achievement indirectly by influencing goal-setting (e.g., Locke & Latham, 1990; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) explore the necessity of self-efficacy in the development of self-directed learners. They describe three important components linked to self-efficacy: (a) behavioral engagement, observable behavior such as that which a teacher can see in classrooms when students are working on a task, (b) cognitive engagement, including critical thinking and the application of critical thinking and metacognition strategies, and (c) motivational engagement, which includes interest in a task and perceptions of the value of the task at hand.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to hear and understand the voices of rural community college students as they described their lived experiences with their honors program. Regardless of whether they participated in the program itself, it is indeed “their” program, for it is there for all of them. For this study, I invited students who took full advantage of the program as well as students who took no advantage of it at all. I hoped to learn from them in order to guide the development of the honors program in ways that will enhance its benefits for future community college students. Because qualitative inquiry focuses on lived experiences, it was a natural choice for this study.

Qualitative research eschews the idea that statistical significance is the only kind that matters in understanding. Abbott (2001) notes that qualitative researchers emphasize “(p)articular interactions, not independent variables” (p. 140). Although there is no ideal qualitative study, key components mark qualitative research as worthy. “Proof” is not a central issue here.

Qualitative researchers, for example, typically prefer examining phenomena in their “natural setting” rather than in a laboratory, and they often consider quantification limiting and artificial. They favor flexibility as inquiry proceeds in context (emergent design). In addition, Trochim (2006) states that qualitative researchers

don't assume that there is a single unitary reality apart from our perceptions. Since each of us experiences from our own point of view, each of us experiences a different reality. Conducting research without taking this into account violates their fundamental view of the individual. Consequently, they may be opposed to methods that attempt to aggregate across individuals on the grounds that each individual is unique. They also argue that the researcher is a unique individual and that all research is essentially biased by each researcher's individual perceptions. There is no point in trying to establish “validity” in any external or objective sense. (p. 3)

Other criteria, such as trustworthiness and authenticity, are widely used criteria for assessing qualitative inquiry, roughly equivalent in importance to validity and reliability as criteria for evaluating quantitative research (Kelly, 2005). In addition, the thoroughness and depth are critical.

Credibility is one feature of trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Because I am deeply involved in the honors program and care about its participants, the design of this research is especially important for establishing trustworthiness. *Triangulation*, or methodically examining the situation of interest from multiple vantage points, was central to my effort. Guion (2002) says, “Triangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies” (p. 1). Schwandt (2001) states that triangulation verifies the integrity of the inferences the researcher draws. Triangulation includes data triangulation and methods triangulation as well as theory triangulation, which I mentioned in Chapter 1. Applying all three types increases the credibility of the conclusions the researcher draws.

Data triangulation involves generating data from multiple relevant sources to illuminate various facets of the phenomenon of interest. Information may be solicited from various stakeholder groups or from people who experience different aspects of the situation. For example, to investigate the effects of an illness, it would be inadequate to note only symptoms, medication regimens, side effects, lifestyle changes, and much else during interviews with patients. Interviews with medical professionals, caregivers, and friends would add richness to the study. Methods triangulation entails generating data using multiple procedures or techniques to provide more depth. Rather than relying only upon interviews, a researcher might include direct observations and unobtrusive methods such as a review of archival data like journals, bank statements, pharmacy bills, appointment calendars, and medical records.

This study includes multiple sources of data. I interviewed students who completed the program and students who did not participate, and I included archival materials. The study also entails multiple methods. I administered surveys, held focus groups, did individual interviews, and conducted both direct observation and archival research. Multiple theoretical perspectives, outlined in Chapter I, informed the research design and the analysis of the data generated in the study.

The Case Study Design

A typical design in qualitative research is the case study, where the unit of analysis may be as small as a single individual or as large as an entire cultural group in the case of ethnography. Zonabend (1992) describes case study as a technique characterized by its comprehensiveness in observation, reconstruction, and analysis of a

phenomenon. Case study provides sufficient flexibility to approach phenomena that are not readily accessible in the laboratory setting. According to Soy (1997), case studies “generally involve multiple sources of data, may include multiple cases within a study, and produce large amounts of data for analysis” (p. 1). Soy further comments

Researchers from many disciplines use the case study method to build upon theory, to produce new theory, to dispute or challenge theory, to explain a situation, to provide a basis to apply solutions to situations, to explore, or to describe an object or phenomenon (p. 1).

Indeed, the requirements and inflexibility of some other research designs, particularly experimental and quasi-experimental, make case studies the only viable alternative in some instances. Soy continues

The advantages of the case study method are its applicability to real-life, contemporary, human situations and its public accessibility through written reports. Case study results relate directly to the common reader’s everyday experience and facilitate an understanding of complex real-life situations (p. 1).

Case studies can be single or multiple-case designs. I focus on a rural community college honors program, and how students make decisions about participating and what they experience as a result, I also look at what the program means to them.

The case focusing this study is the nascent honors program at Alabama Southern Community College. From the outset, the honors program was envisioned with an egalitarian philosophy that would not automatically exclude low-performing students from participating. Many honors programs require students to meet such criteria as some

minimum ACT or SAT score, a minimum high school or first-semester college grade point average, or a well written application essay. Some programs take all qualified applicants, but many accept only the most qualified applicants up to some maximum number of incoming students each year or semester. By contrast, the Alabama Southern honors program accepts students on an open-enrollment basis. Students agree to meet program requirements, and their progress is assessed at the end of each semester. They may enroll in the program as long as they make progress toward both graduating and fulfilling program requirements.

As noted in Chapter 1, Alabama Southern Community College is a public, comprehensive community college in southwest Alabama that serves students primarily from a rural four-county area. Federal census data indicates that per capita income is below both the national and state averages. Educational attainment for adults over 25 years of age lags behind as well. These considerations figure prominently in Alabama Southern's promotional campaigns, which emphasize the benefits of higher education available locally at minimal cost.

The enrollment of Alabama Southern's five campuses totals fewer than 1,300 students. Students must demonstrate competence in reading, English composition, and mathematics prior to enrollment. Those who are not prepared for college-level courses as determined by performance on the Assessment of Skills for Successful Entry and Transfer (ASSET) or ACT take non-credit developmental courses before enrolling in credit-earning courses. According to data provided by the Registrar, in Fall 2007, 177 Alabama Southern students enrolled in developmental English courses: 209 in

developmental mathematics, and 92 in reading. The retention of students from first to second year of enrollment was 31% for full-time students, 69% for part-time students. As the “mission of [the] institution includes providing substantial preparation for students to enroll in another eligible institution WITHOUT having completed their programs” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2008), an important statistic is the transfer out rate of 25%. Graduation rate as of August 2007 was 23%, slightly below the national average of 23.9% reported by the U.S. Department of Education (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2007). Of students receiving associate’s degrees, 7.4% qualified for membership in Phi Theta Kappa, 2.09% were honored as *cum laude* (3.5 GPA), *magna cum laude* (3.7 GPA), or *summa cum laude* (3.9 GPA).

Alabama Southern has been recognized for excellence. Its website boasts that it has “received more national awards of distinction than any other community college in the state” (Alabama Southern Community College, 2008), including the National Bellwether Award for Instructional Excellence in 2005 and finalist for the National Bellwether Award in 2006, home of the National Center for Paper and Chemical Technology, and acknowledged by Dr. George A. Baker, National Alliance of Community and Technical Colleges as “clearly one of the most innovative community colleges in America”(as cited by Alabama Southern Community College, 2008). In an effort to continue to improve the college’s academic reputation, the honors program was initiated in the fall of 2006.

Methods of Generating Data

As noted before, multiple means of data generation as well as multiple data sources reduce the risk of a one-dimensional, myopic vision of a complex situation. With this in mind, I conducted focus groups and individual interviews, administered an open-ended survey, and evaluated archival data. Each method offered a unique angle on specific aspects of the honors program to Alabama Southern Community College students.

Schwandt (2001) notes that a range of interviewing strategies is common in qualitative studies, from structured and closed-ended (e.g., using a set list of interview questions with limited or forced-choice responses) to unstructured, open-ended, and informal. Surveys fall into similar categories. In this study, both interviews and surveys used open-ended questions, and the interviews were semi-structured. That is, the questions allowed participants to answer in flexible, self-directed ways. Schwandt notes that open-ended, informal interviews “allow the most flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues” (p. 135).

Focus groups are group interviews usually composed of six to eight participants chosen for their likely contributions to the study. Focus groups generate data both by what they say in response to the researcher’s open-ended questions (Morgan, 1998) and by the interactions among members (Bloor, Franklin, Thomas, & Robson, 2001). A primary strength of the technique is that, as in any group session, the discussion often goes in unexpected directions. According to Berg (2007), the informal structure of the

focus group interview promotes frank discussion. The researcher takes an organized but flexible approach in guiding focus groups (Myers & MacNaghten, 1999).

In focus groups, power shifts from the researcher to the participants (Madriz, 2003). This is an especially significant circumstance with students who have prior experience with the researcher as an authority figure. In the one-on-one interview, the interviewer clearly holds the reins, controlling the pace and direction of the conversation and setting the agenda. In well-designed group interviews, the interviewer sets the topic, but all group members contribute to the dynamics of the interview.

In order to qualify as college honors graduates, students must successfully complete four honors contracts and at least two semesters of honors forum, a one-credit seminar course. When the program began, we expected to recognize the first honors program graduates in 2008. To our surprise, the first cohort of honors program participants graduated in May 2007. Because the program began when these students had already completed their first year of classes, they are uniquely able to describe the effects of the program's initiation on participating students. I invited all six students who met the requirements to take part in a focus group interview. I anticipated that this session would last about an hour and a half. This semi-structured interview dealt primarily with their perceptions of the impact of the honors program on students, and whether participation in the program met their expectations. Some focusing questions were

1. With only one year to do it, what are one or two reasons you joined the honors program?
2. How did you decide to participate?

3. What did you expect when you entered the program?
4. What were your most satisfying experiences in the program?
5. What were your most frustrating or disappointing experiences?
6. What would you change about the program, and why?
7. Would you encourage other students to participate?
8. What effect has the program had on Alabama Southern?
9. How has participating in the program affected you?

Since many capable students with high grade point averages do not participate, I constructed a survey to solicit their comments about their decision not to join. I sent the survey to all students whose collegiate performance qualified them for membership in Phi Theta Kappa. Questions included

1. Your academic record indicates that you are a motivated, academically capable student. What one or two reasons would you give for your academic success?
2. Is there anything about the honors program at Alabama Southern that appeals to you?
3. Describe how you decided not to participate in the honors program.
4. What were your expectations about the program?
5. Describe your most satisfying academic experiences.
6. Describe your most frustrating or disappointing academic experiences.

On the other hand, some students chose to participate regardless of their previously low achievement. For example, two of the original honors students were on

academic probation when they applied for the program. I invited them to participate in a focus group to share their reasons for interest and involvement, as well as their perceptions about the program and its impact on their collegiate experience, once again using semi-structured interviews.

A small but significant number of students applied for the program, drafted honors contracts, and even participated in the seminars, but either withdrew or did not register for the second semester. I sought their input about their decisions with regard to enrollment as well, using an open-ended questionnaire for this purpose. Survey questions included

1. How did you decide to participate in the honors program?
2. What did you expect when you entered the program?
3. What were your most satisfying experiences in the program?
4. What were your most frustrating or disappointing experiences?
5. What would you change about the program, and why?
6. Would you encourage other students to participate?
7. What effect has the program had on Alabama Southern?
8. What effect has participating in the program had on you?

Students from each of the written-survey groups had the option to be contacted for follow up. As it seemed unlikely that more than half a dozen students from each category would agree to be interviewed, follow-up was accomplished individually using a semi-structured format. I devised questions from the survey responses to further explore

issues of self-efficacy in a single interview session lasting about half an hour with each selected student.

In addition to individual and group interviews and surveys, I generated data from student records about the effects of participating in the program. I looked at the cumulative and per-semester transcripts of all program participants who were enrolled for two or more semesters to determine whether there was any upward trend in grade point averages over the course of enrollment, and to determine whether other patterns were apparent from the available data. Finally, I also looked at feedback gathered from participants through questionnaires and course email as an ongoing part of program development, and I revisited my own direct observations as the program director.

Reflexivity and Ethics

Any discussion of research ethics includes some general considerations that apply to all research with living participants. Trochim (2006) identifies *voluntary participation*, *informed consent*, *confidentiality*, *protection from harm*, and *confidentiality* as essential elements of ethical research. Since no set of standards covers every eventuality, though, institutions have formal procedures for approving research plans so as to make every effort to protect the rights and interests of participants, as well as to protect the institution from liability. These responsibilities belong to *Institutional Review Boards* (IRBs). My research proceeded only after approval from the University of West Florida IRB (See Appendix A).

In addition, some issues are especially relevant to qualitative research. For example, a common criticism of case study research is that the interactions between the

researcher and the participants and the intensity of the exposure of the case to examination can bias the results. However, bias has a slightly different connotation and is dealt with differently in qualitative research than it is in quantitative research. Certainly the researcher is centrally positioned in qualitative research in general, and in the case study in particular. This centrality requires a high level of *reflexivity*, but does not necessarily pollute the research or negate its value. Schwandt (2001) says that reflexivity in the methodological sense is “the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical predispositions, preferences, and so forth” (p. 224). Researchers “need to be aware of the way that their own position and their *a priori* knowledge and assumptions impact upon all aspects of the research: development and design, data collection and interpretation” (Jaye, 2002, p. 560).

Patton (2002) notes that researchers may participate in their studies at various levels from “complete immersion in the setting as full participant to complete separation from the setting as spectator” (p. 265). Elliot (as cited in Schwandt, 2001) conceptualizes these relationships in qualitative studies in the following ways:

Researcher as detached, objective, outside expert; researched as subjects, data sources, and respondents

Researcher as marginal participant (participant-observer); researched as informants

Researcher as facilitator (helping the researched activate their own capacities for self-observation, critique, and advocacy), critic, advocate, change agent, and

adversary to the established and powerful; researched as coresearchers, coparticipants, and collaborators. (Schwandt, p. 74)

The detached expert usually enters into a contract of sorts with participants, explaining mutual expectations and obligations. The more personal relationships of the participant-observer and the facilitator require even more careful attention to ethical concerns. Schwandt (2001) says that “several special obligations arise due to the fact that these relationships are characterized by considerably extended personal exchanges,” which are “dynamic and subject to change over time, [so] they require of the researcher a heightened capacity to anticipate potential ethical dilemmas and demand a special kind of normative attention on the course of fieldwork” (p. 75). This relationship may be better thought of as a covenant than a contract, a distinction that calls attention to the need for “special vigilance or alertness to circumstances that demand attention—and the ever present need to be prepared, through adequate ethical training, to address such circumstances in morally responsible ways” (p. 75). It protects the future relationship between the parties. It goes much further than the standard notion of protecting the rights of research participants.

As the program’s director, my main research role is participant-observer. Not only have I been involved from the very beginning in designing the program, but I am also the instructor for the seminars. Further, I mentor students in my own sociology and psychology courses as they complete honors projects. I have frequent contact with many of them, and I assign their grades. I have the responsibility to evaluate whether they are making satisfactory progress, and if need be, I am the one who dismisses them from the

program. In addition, I have developed close relationships with some of the students. My own niece, as it happens, is in the honors program. My personal and professional values require that I protect these students and their relationships with me while endeavoring to understand their experiences.

Regardless of any pre-existing relationship, and even when the researcher is a peer of the participants, interviews are fraught with issues of power—who controls the direction of the interview, who controls the results, who benefits. To negotiate these variables in developing an equitable interviewing relationship, the interviewer must be acutely aware of his or her own experience with them as well as sensitive to the way these issues may be affecting the participants. (Seidman, 1998, p. 83)

This tension is much more evident in an unequal relationship such as one between teacher and students. In such situations, the researcher must minimize any tendency that students might have to try to please, or to protect their relationship with, the researcher. With this in mind, I repeatedly encouraged participants to share freely, and I reminded them that I could learn from them only if they spoke candidly. I remained sensitive to the need to guard against the possibility that students might be unwilling to provide accurate feedback and criticism and that they might try to tell me only what they believed I wanted to hear. All the while, I assured them that what I wanted to hear is their description of all aspects of their honors program experiences.

My work with these students so far suggests that they are willing to be honest about their expectations, disappointments, and suggestions. A recent incident reinforces

this sense. Tina, a program participant with a rather average academic record overall, was in my introductory psychology class last summer. She was one of the small group who traveled to Washington, DC and New York City in May 2007 as part of the honors program, so we have spent a fair amount of time together. However, the course calendar listed an adjunct instructor for the summer class, and she was surprised to see me at the podium when she arrived for class. She said, "Mrs. McMillan, to be quite honest I took this class at this time to dodge you!" That is typical of how the honors program students tend to interact with me. I had no reason to expect them to be less than forthright if they participated in this research.

Nevertheless, to protect the integrity of this study, I generated some data using written surveys and questionnaires. These came back to the college's post office box for analysis, and provided the option for respondent to remain anonymous. Many of the data, however, derive from interviews. My introductory remarks at these sessions reminded participants that only authentic data would be the most useful for refining and further developing the program, and for that I needed them to be honest.

Students were included in focus groups only if they had completed requirements for the program, had graduated, or were no longer attending Alabama Southern. At that point they should feel no pressure to participate, and their participation can in no way be seen as affecting their grades or success in the program. After the interviews, I performed *member checks*, where respondents have an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the contents or findings of the research. Specifically, I asked participants to review interview transcriptions prior to data analysis. In addition to their value in establishing

trustworthiness, member checks are also a courtesy to participants, a way to protect the respectful relationship between them and the researcher. Finally, I explained the purposes of the research and obtained the informed consent of all interview participants (Appendix B).

Beyond the relationships I already have and will continue to develop with honors students, I am highly invested in the honors program itself. In the philosophical tradition of Nel Noddings (2002), I think my main responsibility as honors program director is to provide “a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding and appreciation” (p. 283). My dedication to doing whatever I can to provide such opportunities and my earnest belief that students’ experiences in the program can significantly benefit them could affect my data generation and analysis. Patton (2002) speaks of the inherent challenges of my situation this way:

Experiencing the setting or program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, the inquirer remains aware of being an outsider. The challenge is to combine participation with observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders. (p. 268).

Therefore, I have been journaling about the activities, plans, insights, and so forth that occurred as the research progressed. Many of my journal entries recounted conversations with and observations of current students. These notes were among the data I generated and analyzed. I have coded for possible expression of my values and

biases in the interview transcripts as well as mined the entries for other themes and insights.

Participants

The participants in this study were Alabama Southern students, former students, and graduates. As noted previously, I contacted students who fell into four discrete categories: (a) students who met all program requirements to graduate with honors in a single year, (b) students who did not meet any conventional definition of “honor student” who chose to participate in the program, (c) students who had records of high achievement who did not participate, and (d) students who entered the program and are currently enrolled at the college, but did not continue to participate in the program. I selected the students using purposive sampling. All students meeting the predetermined criteria were contacted. Clearly, students in some categories were more available and more likely to respond. I retained all four categories of students, though, since I believed I could learn the most from these four types of students

I prepared and distributed two surveys. Survey A went to 18 students who started the program but did not continue participating, although they continued their enrollment at Alabama Southern at least one more semester. I sent Survey B to high achievers who chose not to participate in the honors program. These students must have completed at least twelve hours of transferrable credit with a 3.5 or higher GPA, meeting requirements for membership in Phi Eta Sigma, the most prestigious international honor society for community and junior college students. Thirty-five students met these criteria.

About half of the students selected for Survey A are still students at the college. Four have more than likely left the area, but no current address is available in the college's files. Only one student (5.6%) in this group returned the survey. Another told me he had received it and planned to send it back, but so far he has not done so. Of those students identified for inclusion in Survey B, one survey was returned to sender because of a clerical error in addressing the envelope. Seven of these students (20%) returned their surveys; one signed up for the program upon receiving the survey. All students who returned surveys signed a statement agreeing to individual follow-up. None were returned anonymously.

In order to identify students who met the criteria for inclusion in each of the four groups of interest, I examined archival data from student transcripts. Students currently enrolled in the program were eliminated. I also eliminated students with average or above academic records who participated the first year but who are no longer enrolled at the college. I sorted the records of the remaining students into one of the four groups to contact. The six students who completed the program in its first year made up Focus Group 1. All of them have current contact information easily accessible, and all maintain relationships with faculty at the college. They were, therefore, easy to contact. All six students were willing to participate in the research. Four of the six live in Monroeville and attended the focus group session, while I interviewed the two no longer in town by telephone with email follow-up.

Of the remaining students, eight met the criteria for inclusion in Focus Group 2. This group consists of former honors program students no longer enrolled at the college.

They did not meet the traditional definition of “honors students,” but they started the program at its inception. Only one of these students was a new freshman, and the other seven had grade point averages (GPAs) ranging from 1.697 to 2.714, with a mean of 2.491, or a C average. The highest achiever in the group entered Alabama Southern with a GED, and she required remediation in reading prior to placement in college-level courses. The others had GPAs below 2.75, required remediation in one or more core skills (reading, writing, or mathematics), and had varying records of academic difficulty including full withdrawals or academic probation. The correspondence to two of these students inviting them to participate was returned to sender; staff in the student development office had no current contact with any of the students. Despite phone follow-up to the telephone numbers of record, none of these students attended the focus group meetings.

Finally, I was a participant in the study. As I have already stated, I am the director of the honors program. I therefore entered this research with an *emic* or insider view. As a researcher, though, I am responsible for, as Patton (2002) charges, “understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders” (p. 268). As researcher, I am also responsible for respecting and protecting the participants in the study. To this end, I obtained the necessary approval from the University of West Florida Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects and followed both the letter and the spirit of its guiding principles. I disclosed the purpose of this research to potential participants, and emphasized the voluntary nature of participation. I assured confidentiality by

aggregating data at times, and by using pseudonyms. As the study progressed, I kept field notes about the research and the program.

The symbolic interactionist perspective I adopted emphasizes that words both reflect and create meaning. As researcher, I conducted the interviews, transcribed the audiotapes of those interviews, made notes of nonverbal behavior, created the coding system, and reported upon aspects that were, to me, germane to my purposes. By definition, then, there were questions not asked, behaviors not noted, and so on. Without doubt, I shaped the data. As I transcribed, coded, analyzed, notated, and eventually organized, formulated and wrote this dissertation, my word choices served both to construct as well as to communicate the findings of this research.

In addition, I am a 45-year-old middle class Southern White woman, a Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude university graduate. I have been married for 25 years, and I am the mother of a graduate student in a doctoral program in applied statistics and of an undergraduate history major, both of whom attend my alma mater. I am an instructor of psychology and sociology at Alabama Southern Community College, and I am a graduate student in the Ed.D. program at the University of West Florida. My experiences, most certainly, have shaped the ideas that I brought to this study. These same experiences have also shaped the ideas I brought to the honors program. In the upcoming chapter I look first, though, at the institutional setting these ideas had both to fit and to disrupt in some academically beneficial ways.

CHAPTER IV

A TIME AND A PLACE FOR AN HONORS PROGRAM

Alabama Southern Community College is a comprehensive two-year college. The current constellation developed from the merger of Patrick Henry Junior College in Monroeville and Hobson State Technical School in Thomasville. This merger occurred in 1991. The two schools were originally chartered by the state legislature in 1963, and both began operations in 1965. With campuses in five locations scattered in four counties, Alabama Southern Community College now serves an approximate 5,000 square mile area of southwest Alabama. Its two main campuses are located in Monroeville and Thomasville, about 50 miles apart. Monroeville, the administrative center, retains the reputation as the more academic campus.

In many ways, Alabama Southern is typical of rural community colleges, filling a range of needs. Each of its campuses has a distinct role and personality. As its catalog says, “The Monroeville campus offers a variety of degree programs for university transfer, business technology, and associate degree nursing. Students can also complete general required courses for any program on the Monroeville campus” (p. 7). The more technical emphasis of the Thomasville campus is reflected in this description, also from the catalog: This campus “offers degree programs in advanced technology, emergency medical services, business technology and university transfer. Thomasville students can also choose from several certificate programs specifically designed for careers in area

industries including welding, construction electricity, cosmetology, and practical nursing” (p. 7). The other three campuses are smaller and offer a smaller variety of courses. Located in Jackson, Gilbertown, and Demopolis, they are 50-100 miles from the Monroeville campus. Although distance often limits participation in college organizations and activities, students from all campuses are encouraged to participate in the honors program.

Twenty-nine full-time and regular part-time faculty and a varying number of adjunct instructors serve the five campuses. Several, including me, regularly teach on more than one campus. Instructors often come to the community college after teaching in high schools or pursuing non-teaching careers. Adjunct faculty must have the same credentials as regular faculty; some of them exceed the academic qualifications and real-world experience of the full-time educators. For example, an occasional biology class may be taught by a local physician, or a business law class may snag a seasoned lawyer as a teacher. Especially in rural areas, it is the rare community college teacher who holds a doctorate. At Alabama Southern, one regular part-time and one full-time instructor have doctoral degrees. A number of the faculty members were themselves educated at community colleges. Most of them obtained their bachelor’s and master’s degrees at public universities.

The First Year of the Program

As I wrote the honors program description, I consulted frequently with the college’s President, Dr. John A. Johnson, to ensure that the document expressed our shared vision. The student development staff sent letters of invitation to all students

registered for fall classes, as well as to every student who had been enrolled during the summer semester prior to the program's inception. Copies of the letter to students and the program description were distributed at faculty/staff orientation, and a special session of the professional development training was devoted to describing the program in detail and answering questions. All faculty were asked to encourage students to participate and to help them understand the benefits of involvement. There was surprisingly little discussion and very few questions; comments were generally supportive, if somewhat unenthusiastic. This initial response, while not unexpected, was a bit disappointing. Dr. Johnson and I agreed that an ambitious but attainable goal would be to enroll 25 students in the first semester.

The difficulty that I encountered with the actual implementation of the program, however, belied the verbalized support. No part of the process was without its obstacles. As the semester began, staff disavowed knowledge of the program's existence, students were discouraged from signing up, and faculty were reported to have remarked that only a fool would intentionally take on additional work for so little reward. Paperwork mysteriously disappeared without a trace. Nevertheless, 32 students enrolled. I was, and continue to be, delighted with the response from the students.

By fall of the second year, a total of 116 students had registered for the program. Demographically, they covered the waterfront. They were of various ages, both genders, and multiple ethnicities. They were part-time and full-time students with all manner of family and work commitments. They were interested in a variety of career goals and transfer majors. They were, in short, typical of the students at community colleges.

Their credentials were also typical of community college students. Of the students with ACT scores on file, the average composite was 21.68, and scores ranged from 15 to 32. However, 42 students did not report scores. Students who entered the program after their first semester at Alabama Southern brought with them a range of grade point averages (GPAs) from 1.43 to 4.0. The average of these GPAs was 3.07. These students had completed from 6 to 62 hours when they entered the program. Students from all five campuses enrolled in the program, but in predictably unequal numbers. As expected, students from the outlying campuses were much less likely to sign up than those residing near Monroeville and Thomasville. Distance from service provision is a well-documented barrier to participation in a number of programs (Frenette, 2004).

The course loads the students undertook ranged from 4 to 19 credit hours. Each student contracted with one or more instructors to mentor them in their honors projects. That first semester, students wrote contracts in art, biology, business technology, computer science, economics, English composition, literature, mathematics, music, nursing, psychology, sociology and speech. The second semester, the list expanded to include history, philosophy, physical science and religion, as well. In order to establish some degree of consistency in the level of work required for honors designations, division chairs reviewed the contracts before they came to me for approval. That topics and projects should be based on the student's interests and, if possible, their personal goals, was emphasized to both faculty and students. Most of them met both the letter and spirit of that expectation, offering students individualized, interesting, experience-based

learning activities that enhanced the regular curriculum and allowed them to display their accomplishments in creative ways.

For example, a biology student who suffered from psoriasis researched that condition. She prepared a computer-based teaching presentation including photos, a written research report, and a scrapbook that documented her research process. She covered the scrapbook with a textured pink fabric to symbolize the effects of psoriasis. She also included her own personal thoughts and experiences dealing with her disorder. An English composition student did a study of Blake's poetry, and then wrote and illustrated several original works. A literature student researched Egyptian mythology, something only touched upon in class, and then wrote a story in a similar style. Her project included synopses of the myths and original artwork illustrating it, as well as her own writing sample. A psychology student wrote a contract to use operant conditioning techniques to do a self-modification project, documented by gathering quantitative data and taking photographs in order to prepare a poster presentation of the experience. A young man asked to write a research report on some major mental illness, probably schizophrenia. I told him I wanted him to do something more interesting and experiential than just writing a report, and arranged for him to visit both the state mental hospital and the local mental health center to observe the treatment of schizophrenia directly. He was able to interview a patient and a direct care provider in each setting. He also watched the movie *A Beautiful Mind* and the report that he wrote included a brief review of the research literature, a comparison that literature with the movie's depiction and with what he directly observed, and a report of his interviews and his own impressions and

reactions. A sociology student read Duneier's *Sidewalk*, and then visited a homeless shelter.

The project selected as the Outstanding Honors Project for 2006-2007 was prepared by Markita. Unlike so many others, it included no written research report. Her biology project was to research the nervous system and prepare a magazine-style publication of her findings. She did thorough research, refined her skills in abstracting, summarizing, and quoting, and documented her work appropriately. She included a variety of illustrations from brain scans to cartoons. In addition to learning about the brain and spinal cord, she learned about layout and publishing, and became much more comfortable with computer technology. Her product was quite impressive in its content as well as in its professional appearance.

Some faculty members, however, apparently missed the point and assigned reams of extra, but not particularly enriching, work. One instructor offered exactly the same project to each student who approached him and would not consider any other. They could write a 15-20 page research paper on one of a short list of approved topics, with a specified minimum number of references in Modern Language Association (MLA) format. Despite my attempts to explain that doing an additional research paper had, in my opinion, very little merit as an honors project, he remained steadfast. Not surprisingly, not a single student opted to complete his class with an honors designation.

Others asked rather too little that first semester. One student completed her first semester's honors project by merely completing additional homework problems. If the instructor had complied by filing her contract with the division director and with me at

the beginning of the semester, the student would have been required to contract for and complete a more appropriate project in order to receive her credit. Unfortunately, the contract never reached me for review. So, she completed the course and the extra work as agreed; and her teacher sent me the contract, a copy of the work completed, and a request that honors credit be awarded. Since the student did this work in good faith, and the error was the instructor's, I decided to award the credit in order to encourage the student and to promote goodwill. I struggled with this decision, but in the long run, it seems to have been a right one.

The level of support the various mentors provided varied as greatly as their interest and skill in creating contracts. One teacher asked that her students meet with her every two weeks to assess their progress. Several did not meet with their students at all, seeing themselves as available but offering no particular structure. Neither of these extremes produced consistently high quality work, and neither was especially likely to bring student projects to successful completion. Better results were likely to occur when the level of support, like the contract itself, was individualized.

At the beginning of the first semester, 44 students wrote 51 contracts, including 14 who attempted two contracts, and three who ambitiously contracted in three courses. Of these, 22 students completed at least one contract. In all, 17 students earned honors designation in 26 courses. In the second semester, 44 students wrote 53 contracts. Nine students attempted two contracts; only one student attempted contracts in more than three courses. Of these, 19 students completed at least one contract; 9 completed two. Twenty-eight courses were successfully completed with the honors designation. The grand total

for the 2006-2007 academic year, then, was about 30 students completing well over 60 honors projects. Of those who did not complete their projects, the majority believed they were unlikely to attain the B grade required for honors credit or found the extra work too onerous to complete. Honors credit was awarded to 21 students in 54 classes.

The Required Honors Seminar

One of the first orders of business in creating the required honors seminar was to assign a course number. The Alabama College System, part of the Post-Secondary division of the Alabama Board of Education, maintains the master list of course descriptions and identifiers to be used by community colleges. Among the approved course descriptions is Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) 115. It allows repeatable course credit for attendance at lectures, concerts, and other cultural events and programs in the community or at the college. IDS115, then, seemed to be a reasonable designation. My course is interdisciplinary, and I planned to expose students to exactly the sorts of experiences listed here. The course description already existed in the computer system, so adding this course should be a straightforward process. Let it suffice to say that it was much more complex than it sounded, and I will elaborate about that later. In addition, the course number itself was not conducive to building respect for the program

We intentionally scheduled IDS115 to meet on Friday mornings so it would interfere as little as possible with other courses, and students could more easily work it into their schedules. Few classes at Alabama Southern meet on Fridays. The catalog for Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 listed only Biology and Chemistry lab sections and a freshman “orientation to college” type class called Leadership that would conflict with Honors

Forum. Designated as IDS 299, Leadership is not generally seen as very important by students or faculty for several reasons. The 2005-2007 Alabama Southern Community College (2005) catalogue describes the course as follows:

This course introduces the entering student to college life, responsibilities, rules and regulations, college services, academic success skills, research skills, stress management, career planning, and job seeking skills. Outcomes for this course include: Development of a portfolio; Demonstrated understanding of the *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*; Application of knowledge gained from self-assessment with special emphasis on the Success Battery instruments; Practicing team-building skills; identification of personal strengths; and Goal setting (sic).

(p. 38)

The curriculum for Leadership varies dramatically from semester to semester, and the class is taught by a wide variety of faculty and staff. Among those are instructors who themselves do not seem to take the course seriously. As an example, last spring's academic calendar stated that classes began on January 5, a Friday. Monroeville campus IDS299 students gathered for their class, but no instructor appeared. The assembled students began to amble out into the hall, asking passersby where the teacher was. I went to the Student Development office to inquire and was told that the class was not going to meet that day and that I should so inform the students. The young woman assigned to teach the class was present, though, and eventually agreed to meet the class and dismiss it herself. It took at least another five minutes for her to get to the classroom. By then, students had been waiting more than twenty minutes. That this class had little priority

could not have been communicated more effectively. Other than Honors Forum, Leadership is the only IDS class offered at our school. Perhaps that unhappy coincidence contributed to the difficulty I encountered in establishing the Honors Forum as a class.

Other characteristics of the Honors Forum make it less than traditional, and thus less than palatable, to some observers. Topics in the first year of the required honors seminar ran the gambit. I did not follow a single theme, discipline, packaged curriculum, or course outline fixed at the beginning of the term. I did not purchase a satellite feed from anyone nor did I employ Phi Theta Kappa or anyone else's format. Attendees heard guest speakers, went on field experiences, and shared their plans for their honors projects. The required honors seminar meets only once each month and is not assigned to a regular classroom. Meeting times are listed in the course schedule as "to be announced." This flexible approach is a hallmark of the program. However, its non-traditional configuration made promoting it as a bona fide, credit-earning course a big challenge.

The first class meeting of Fall 2006 occurred in mid-September. We intentionally set the date about three weeks into the semester so students could hear about the new program, think about it, ask questions, add it to their schedules, seek information about contracts, select their honors mentors, and get paperwork done before that meeting. Our first meeting was an all-day seminar with a motivational speaker. This event was something of a big-ticket item and was held in conjunction with another campus organization, coincidentally named Student Leadership Association (SLA). SLA was pushing an awards program called the Leadership Medallion program that would

recognize students for outstanding community service. Attendance at the seminar was required by both SLA and the Honors Forum. This arrangement had mixed results, as some of the students were confused about the differences between the two programs. Some believed themselves enrolled in both programs by virtue of attendance at this seminar. This confusion took a bit of time to alleviate.

The next meeting was much less glamorous, but important nonetheless. Students were supposed to bring their completed contracts to class if they had not already filed them with me. I made and distributed posters with the date, time and place of the class meeting printed on them to be displayed on all campuses, and I sent reminder emails to enrolled students through our e-learning platform, WebCT. Many, but not all of the enrolled students, attended that meeting. We went over honors program requirements, paperwork, and students shared their ideas for projects. I was concerned that students would be disappointed by this housekeeping session, but they actually appreciated the opportunity to have their concerns addressed and questions answered. I also offered a hands-on workshop on academic planning and advising, understanding articulation agreements for transfer, and resume' writing.

By this time, a small number of students had made no contact with me at all after applying and enrolling, in person, by phone, WebCT, or even by turning in completed Honors Contracts. I tried to get in touch with them through all means at my disposal to remind them that they could still succeed in IDS115, but they needed to do some makeup assignments and turn in their paperwork at once. I also told them that they needed to formally withdraw through the registrar's office if they did not plan to attend the class.

Some students responded that they had not understood that this was actually a class and thus had not understood that it would be necessary to file a Drop request.

From the beginning, I had wanted Dr. Johnson to attend at least one of the seminar meetings so that students could interact with him, something students rarely get to do. Many of our students hear him speak for the first time at their commencement ceremony. So, at our next seminar meeting, Dr. Johnson spoke on his vision for the program. He took questions and listened to students describe their projects and their feelings about the honors program. They shared openly with him and were vocal about their excitement that they had a chance to spend time with the College President. The second part of this session took a different direction, with another guest speaker introducing students to the basics of historical preservation. As director of the Old St. Stephens Historical Association, he presented a passionate plea that they develop interest in local history. He invited them to participate in an upcoming archaeological dig at the site of the first capital of Alabama. I was not sure they would go since the dig was set on a Saturday. However, they enthusiastically signed up. We were all disappointed when the trip got rained out. Worse, there was no opportunity to reschedule it the rest of that academic year.

The next session took place at our Demopolis campus. I arranged with the Alabama Humanities Foundation for a speaker to talk to students about gathering oral histories. His personal interest is ghost stories, so the session developed into a lesson on oral histories and folklore followed by his reading some collected ghost stories from the Demopolis area, culminating with a visit to two of the houses that local lore hold to be

haunted. Although the agenda appealed to me, I had been concerned that the students might be bored. With the travel time involved, the majority of students would be occupied from 8:00 that morning until 5:00 that evening. As it turned out, I underestimated them. They listened intently to the speaker and asked thoughtful questions in the classroom portion of the meeting. Then, they visited the antebellum houses, got hands-on history and literature lessons, learned a little about interview techniques, and did not want to go home. The only complaint I received about this session was that it was too short.

We kicked off the next semester with another round of housekeeping, which I realized was entirely necessary, so I approached it unapologetically. There were new students, and the paperwork and program requirements still mystified some of the veterans. I invited all interested faculty to attend, too, to ensure they were on board and still in touch with the necessary paperwork. It came as no surprise that few attended.

When my son came home from college for Christmas break, he brought a documentary that he had found unusually moving entitled *Invisible Children* (Poole, 2006). The film is about the child soldiers in Uganda. I watched it with him, and agreed that it was something my students would benefit from viewing. We watched it at our February meeting. Discussion centered upon global stratification, and some of the implications for the U.S. The response was, again, amazing. Some students cried; several stayed after class to continue the discussion. One or two refused to believe that the material in the video was authentic. Two later borrowed it to show at community

organizations in order to raise money to send to the Invisible Children Foundation to help their cause. None left unaffected, including me.

Another collaborative effort took us to the Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center in Mobile to visit the travelling exhibit on Pompeii. One of the people who had expressed reluctance about developing an honors program was the director of Student Support Services (SSS). Her role is to provide specific, federal grant-funded services to students who meet specific guidelines for inclusion. Services include tutoring, academic advising, transfer assistance, workshops, mentoring, a small amount of financial assistance, and cultural enrichment. The goal of the program is to increase retention and graduation among participants. Her resistance centered upon possible duplication of services and consequent competition for participants. She has had some difficulty in recent years getting her students to participate in the workshops and cultural enrichment events required by her funding source. I did not anticipate competing for students and hoped that she would encourage her students to take advantage of the egalitarian philosophy of the honors program. In this spirit, I asked her to coordinate a cultural enrichment opportunity with me. I could pay for the expenses of the overlapping students, and we could share transportation costs, relieving her budget slightly. It might also encourage her students to go on the trip. Given the benefits to the SSS program, the director agreed, and even pursued, this cooperative effort. She helped with the logistics, something she had a great deal more experience in than I did.

The trip was a qualified success. The exhibit was excellent. It featured the earth science of volcanology, a walk-through recreation of parts of the city with great displays

built from artifacts unearthed in Pompeii, including artwork and food and furniture, and the centerpiece of the event—casts of the bodies recovered from the city, preserved in the layers of ash. It was, to me, an awesome experience. Both of our groups of students generally lack knowledge of geography and history. Only a tiny handful knew anything about Vesuvius or had any idea what had happened at Pompeii before the trip. They did not understand why the artifacts they saw included both Greek and Roman mythological symbols. The post-exhibit session using Google Earth images showing where Pompeii was located, as well as the relative positions of Italy and Greece, was quite informative for them. However, the majority of the SSS group went through the exhibit as if on a forced march. They were ready to leave in less than two hours and were not particularly interested in the IMAX film that followed. By contrast, the evaluations that my students completed indicated that they needed more time to explore. Two or three of them returned on their own, and several asked that we plan our own trips in the future. In response, and as my confidence has increased, I have planned more elaborate, varied, and frequent enrichment experiences for my students.

Although the format has its critics, the nontraditional, loose structure of the seminar fits my vision of the program. From my perspective, the IDS115 class has two major purposes and several minor functions. First, it lets honors students from all campuses participate together in activities to expand their intellectual horizons while building community. For example, they planned and carried out a community service project, the first that some of them had ever done. They practiced preparing resumes and writing personal statements. They competed to have their work selected as Outstanding

Honors Project. They were encouraged to apply for scholarships and honors. They made new friends and helped each other stay on task. They wrote contracts to complete honors credit in a delightful array of courses, depending upon their own interests. In addition, it gives me the freedom to tailor meetings to students' needs and preferences, and to interact with them more personally and informally than is possible in a traditional classroom setting. The less rigid grading structure lets students benefit from the program without worrying about a negative effect on their grade point averages. Many students took advantage of the "no risk" clause in the program description and did not complete their honors projects or make the grades necessary for honors credit, but still participated in the enriching activities of the seminar. Though most who registered continued to participate until the end of the semester, some, for reasons I found mysterious and ill-considered, dropped the seminar, generally without talking to me about it first.

Near the end of the first year, I gave out a brief survey about the program, asking them the reasons they were in the program, what they liked and disliked, and suggestions for improvements, speakers, and seminar topics. I also asked if they planned to be in the program the following semester. All 21 students in attendance that day returned the survey, and all reported that they enjoyed the program and intended to continue. Several focused on the short-term rewards of the program. For example, Tyson wrote that he joined because of "scholarships, challenge, experience, friends, higher education, involvement with school." Others said, "Enrichment activities," "Looks good on your transcript," "I believe that it will look good on my transcripts, and I thought that it would be fun," and "It seemed interesting & fun & I would like to graduate with honors."

A few students wrote that their teachers provided their motivation: “I was encouraged to join by my instructors to give it consideration,” and “My nursing instructors encouraged me to do this. They made me feel as if I am capable of doing well and that it would be beneficial for my future.”

Some took a broader view. For example: “This will help me participate in community service and get more involved,” “It will help me look into different aspects of my future career,” “I realize that it will enrich my educational experience as a whole,” “I wanted to challenge myself to do better,” “I believe I will benefit greatly from the program. I feel that the program will help push me to do greater things. I have the opportunity to learn new things and get hands on experience,” and, “I wanted to strive as well as be pushed to be and do more for myself. To achieve more in school so that I can in life as far as the real world and every day issues go.” Erin says, “It was at first about the trips, but now it is a personal conquest. I am an independent, intelligent woman and I want to open myself up to different possibilities.”

They rated all aspects favorably. Students listed trips, activities, and speakers as favorites, with several noting that they valued the seminar in various ways: “I have loved the meetings. I love the way we are encouraged to aim high and use our own unique methods to meet our goals,” “I enjoy listening to the speakers and meeting new people. I am sure I will enjoy the trips and service projects also,” “I like the community services opportunities,” and “Love hearing the speakers and all of the learning and community based projects.”

They enjoyed the camaraderie. For example, they said they liked “Interaction with other students,” “Fellowship w/ other honors students,” “Interaction with fellow students. Great learning opportunity,” and “I like being able to conversate and interact with my peers.” They also commented that they like the individualized approach of the program: “You get to choose what you want to do,” “We have a chance to learn more in this class than in our other classes. Getting a chance to have an hands on experience within our society,” “Students get to express their ideas and feelings in creative ways,” “Being able to pick projects and work @ individuals pace” and “I have loved the meetings. I love the way we are encouraged to aim high and use our own unique methods to meet our goals.” One of my favorite responses was “The programs are great! I love the ‘nothing’s too big or creative’ way of thinking. The new ways of thinking are so refreshing.”

They also provided suggestions for upcoming seminar topics and speakers, from Condaleeza Rice to local pastors and the college’s baseball coach, and from attending the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, hearing from professors and other experts in particular fields, to using meetings to talk more about their own projects. They asked to take more trips. I have already been able to use many of their suggestions.

All the students indicated that they were glad they had joined the program. These pioneering early participants are the ones whose experiences with the program are the most instructive. Therefore, theirs are the voices I most wanted to hear as I explored the meaning of the honors program.

The Honors Travel Experience

Every student who participates in the honors program has a chance to travel. Some trips are part of the seminar experiences. Others have been taken to fulfill honors contracts, such as when Josie went to a Scottish Festival and Highland Games in Mississippi to compare it with the Native American Powwow she regularly attends to celebrate her heritage. Another example is when Angie went to a professional conference at the University of Alabama in Birmingham as part of her research on caring for high-risk maternity patients. In addition to these small-scale ventures, the program also features a summer travel opportunity. The plan is to alternate between domestic and international destinations each year. The first year, I planned to take the entire group, or as many as wanted to go, to Washington, DC. In our early conversations about funding, I had understood that the college would see to it that the cost would be no obstacle for any student who wanted to go. My understanding was that students would be required to pay some nominal amount in order to make sure they were invested in the trip, and that they would be expected to assist with some fundraising, and in return, their expenses would be covered.

As the program took shape, expectations changed. It became clear, first of all, that more students were in the program than we had anticipated. To fully support their travel would require a great deal of money. I also developed the opinion that varying levels of participation in the honors program should be rewarded with different levels of financial support. To address both issues, I proposed a funding plan that would require each traveler to pay at least \$250 toward the \$1000 total. Any student who had been in the

program both semesters and had completed four contracts would have the remaining \$750 paid. No student would pay more than \$900 for the four day trip, which included all transportation, admission fees, rooming costs, and most meals. While this deal was under negotiation, students had to sign up basically expecting to pay the whole cost themselves, something unfortunately few of them could afford. Nonetheless, seven students paid the first \$150 application fee, and those students indeed traveled with me.

Even though we used an established academic tour company, planning this experience was harder than it may sound. I did not know, for example, that the dates we originally selected and planned around were only target dates. Further, if the company could not find another group with which to consolidate my students, our tour might be cancelled. I found out though. The tour consultant telephoned to tell me that the group we had been combined with had backed out of the trip and that we could either change our dates to match theirs or have our money refunded. A change of date was out of the question because some of my students would be leaving the area within a few days of graduation. I insisted that my students were going to Washington, DC, one way or another, and asked her to suggest an acceptable alternative. She proposed that we move our date by one day, add a day of travel, and go with a group scheduled to visit both Washington DC and New York City. Unfortunately, the cost would increase by a little over \$100 per student. I got approval to make the change and to pay the increased fees for the students. They were absolutely thrilled, and several others told me they would have gone had they known we would be going to New York. I reminded them that the point of the trip was to experience new things and that they would have had a good time and

learned something regardless of the destination. I gave my traditional speech about the importance of cognitive adventurousness and intellectual curiosity, an exercise which always makes me feel better in such situations but rarely has any other effect. It gave me great pleasure, though, when I heard the students who traveled with me begin to echo that speech.

No one who went was disappointed. Excluding me, the group consisted of six females and one male; two were African American, one Native American, four European American. The oldest student, Tina, was 23. Cameron, a dual-enrolled high school senior, was the youngest at 18. Only three of them had ever been on an airplane before. Casey had never been away from her mother more than overnight. Markita, the student who had earned the Outstanding Honors Project award, was among the group.

I asked each student to write in a group journal each day of the trip. I planned to give the book to Dr. Johnson when we returned and to add to it on each summer travel experience. Some of them wrote entries that simply noted what they visited or did on a particular day, but some of them were heartfelt and moving descriptions. Casey wrote of her pleasure at her new-found independence. Josie thanked Dr. Johnson for allowing her to visit the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. Cameron wrote, "If I am married to Thomasville, I have just had a deep, dark, thrilling affair with New York City. I will come back here someday. I do not know if I would have ever had this chance without this program, and for that I am sincerely thankful."

Besides the monuments, the museums, the Statue of Liberty, the Broadway musical, and the other typical tour features, there were students on tour with us from

Florida, Texas, Michigan, and Alaska. A young man from an Inuit village told us about his first whale hunt, which involved, among other things, a John Deere tractor. Several of the Texans were first generation Americans. The group from Florida refused to tour on Sunday morning, opting to attend church instead. What a rare treat it was for me and my students to meet these interesting people. No classroom can match the spontaneous experiences and serendipitous learning that took place on this tour.

Searching for Students Among the Records

Transcripts are interesting compilations of specific facts of academic life. While it is generally believed that transcripts are objective records of the relevant events of students' collegiate careers, they are actually surprisingly easy to misinterpret. I found these records much richer in information than I had anticipated. One of the first forays into data analysis involved comparing GPAs at the beginning and end of each semester of participation in the honors program. I found little difference in the average for all participants, but interesting changes in some specific students. For example, Melissa began with a 4.0. Her GPA is still a respectable 3.5, but it has fallen each semester. Beginning in Fall 2006, she has enrolled in honors each semester, but she did not successfully complete a single project Fall 2007. Had she failed to complete one that semester, she would have been ineligible for continued participation. This semester, Spring 2008, she is attempting three projects in hopes that she will be able to be an Honors Graduate. Kinsey's 1.667 GPA jumped to 2.421 the semester she spent in honors, but fell back to 1.867 in the summer. She enrolled for Fall 2007, but withdrew mid-semester to move to Mississippi because of family issues concerning her younger sister.

This examination reminded me how thoroughly individual stories can be muted or even obscured in quantitative data, an observation that would be further reinforced as my study progressed.

For instance, to prepare for the active phase of selecting students for interviews and surveys, I initially intended to review transcripts primarily for two bits of data that I would use to categorize the students as low, average, or high achievers. I thought I could look at ACT scores for new students, grade point averages for returning students, and simply sort them. I soon learned that my plan was simplistic. I found, for example, that a GPA could fall into the average or even high range as the result of “bankrupting” a semester of failing and near-failing grades. The grades are not deleted from the transcript, but they can, at the student’s request, be “disregarded in the cumulative GPA” (Alabama Southern Community College, 2005, p. 54). Also, students who receive a D or an F can retake the class, with the low grade still on the transcript, but the GPA figured without it. Grades from previous admissions or admissions to other institutions only include courses accepted for credit, so failing grades can be difficult to detect. As for comparing test scores, only students seeking scholarships must submit ACT scores, so many community college students opt out of taking the test. For these reasons, I had to change my approach. This was the first surprise I encountered as I delved into data generation and analysis.

If GPAs and ACT scores inadequately capture the students’ stories, I needed some other way to select potential group members. I made a list of typical items reported in the transcripts and analyzed each student record. As I coded the data, the students

practically sorted themselves into groups. Some students had clear records of success on the first attempt. They had consistent academic performances and generally had a smattering of academic honors of one kind or another. They had not enrolled in developmental (remedial) classes; they had not withdrawn from all classes in a given semester, earned failing grades, or been placed on academic suspension. They almost always had GPAs of 2.67 (B-) or better.

Other students' records were much less predictable. Many of them had attended in fits and starts, often with a long gap between successfully completed courses. Several had withdrawn from school mid-semester or had failed to withdraw when they should have and had thus had failed multiple classes. Three had been placed on academic probation because of very low GPAs. Almost all had at least one failing grade on the transcript, and a similar proportion had required remediation in one or more areas upon enrolling at Alabama Southern. For inclusion in the study, honors program participants had to have a history of low achievement including two or more of the following: GPA below 2.5 (C+), placement in one or more developmental courses, more than one grade of F earned at Alabama Southern, history of at least one withdrawal for an entire term, or placement on academic probation. Given the complexities I mentioned earlier in their calculation, these criteria seem to yield a more information-rich sample than GPA alone.

Data Analysis

My research plan was a simple one: I would hold two focus groups and administer two surveys, and follow up individually as necessary. I would compare and contrast the focus group transcripts, and similarly analyze the survey responses. What I

found, though, was that there were more types of data to analyze than I had anticipated. One of the first patterns that emerged was a striking difference in how easy or difficult it was to locate and contact students in the various categories; another was a clear difference in response rate to my request for input between the various groups of students once they were contacted. As I became aware of these issues, I considered possible explanations as well as alternative approaches that might be needed to flesh out data that were, after the first pass, missing in action.

From the outset, I was acutely aware that there would be no simple fail-safe way to present the data that the participants and I would generate. As students shared their thoughts with me, I attempted to sort through what they told me so I could present their meanings while adequately exploring my research questions. As I struggled to systematize my observations, then, I had to devise a method of organizing the data that would reflect my major purposes. I did this by returning to the theoretical framework that underpinned this study.

After transcribing the first focus group interview, I read and re-read it several times, making marginal notes about its contents. I similarly categorized survey responses and comments from individual conversations. In keeping with my theoretical structure and basic research questions, I looked for similarities and variations in accounts about of the meaning of the program to participants, completers, and non-participants. I also coded for verbalizations related to agency or, in Bandura's (1977) terms, self-efficacy. That is, I noted statements regarding the speakers' beliefs about their personal ability to succeed, the short-term appeal of program activities, and the long-term value of participation in

order to see if Bandura's formulation fit. I had selected certain groups of students for inclusion in the study because I believed that they had discernibly different experiences with the program. I wanted to know whether their reports of their lived experiences would echo Bandura's ideas about self-efficacy. I had chosen specific students as representatives of groups that I supposed to have had fundamentally different experiences of the honors program, and thus to have constructed different meanings that the program had had for them. If my assumptions had merit, the members of the various groups I included would likely offer statements differing in significant ways.

I examined the 111 transcripts of students who enrolled in the honors program in the first three semesters of its operation, Fall 2006 through Fall 2007. Of those students, nine started the program the semester before graduating or transferring, giving them only one semester of participation. Of 48 students who had posted GPAs at the time they started the program, 16 enjoyed increases in GPA of at least .05 or started with grades that were so close to 4.0 that they could not improve much.

One of these students, Tina, was considered a long-shot for the honors program by some instructors. She did not graduate from high school and entered college with a general educational development (GED) certificate and needed remediation in reading to prepare her for college coursework. She was pursuing a degree in business technology and had a GPA of 2.714 after 35 semester hours when she entered the honors program. She fully intended to be an Honors Graduate, but was, unfortunately, unable to do so. Some of her difficulty arose from her poor reading comprehension. She failed to turn in forms and other required documentation on time, but I made sure she was not penalized

for merely bureaucratic reasons. However, she expected to earn honors credit in a non-transferrable technical course and misunderstood that she could neither complete honors courses in the summer nor be honored as a program completer prior to actually fulfilling program requirements. We had many conversations about the requirements. At graduation, she had completed three honors contracts and had a GPA of 2.84, a very respectable record. While she was not the recipient of an Honors Program Graduate medallion at graduation, I have no doubt that Tina benefitted from the honors program, and I know that she agrees. Once Tina graduated, she encouraged her sister and a cousin to participate in the program, and she told me that having traveled to New York had changed her opinion about “big city life,” which she had thought she would dislike. After the trip, she said that she was seriously considering going to stay with her cousin in Los Angeles, something she had previously dismissed out of hand.

Excluding those whose grades were at the ceiling, 12 finished with GPAs within .05 quality points of the one they had initially. Of the students who completed the program in two semesters, one had a very high GPA when she began, four stayed about the same, and Ivy, whose story will be shared in some detail, increased quite dramatically. She started with a 1.142, and ended with a 3.463.

The remaining 20 students, or nearly 42%, ended up with grades .05 or more lower than they had at the start. For various reasons, only one of these 20 students was still enrolled in the program when this study began. Some graduated or transferred, and some simply did not re-enroll. Four students ended with grades below 1.5 and were on academic probation at the end of their first semester. Two students on probation when

they enrolled in the program were unable to recover an acceptable GPA and were suspended from attendance.

Karen, the lone exception, is exactly the type of student one might expect to be in an honors program. She started at Alabama Southern as a dual-enrolled high school student. When she began the program, she had earned 13 credit hours and a GPA of 4.0. Her parents are both college educated professionals, and she plans to attend graduate school, though she is unsure in what field. At the end of her first semester in the program, her GPA had fallen to 3.87, and by the end of the spring she carried a 3.561. Each of those first semesters she failed to complete her honors projects because she did not believe her grade would be high enough in the class to earn the honors credits. In each case, her fear was unfounded, but she earned no honors credits in the first year of the program. The B she made in her only summer class brought her to a 3.523. She finally completed a contract in Fall 2007, and her GPA is now a 3.446. She wishes she had finished her other projects, too, but says she was too overwhelmed at the time. It is unlikely that she will finish enough completed contracts to graduate with honors, but she is still participating and she says she enjoys the program and would recommend it to others.

Many traditional freshmen and sophomores, as well as non-traditional collegians who are primary caregivers of school-aged children, take a break from classes in the summer. Most of the transcripts I reviewed followed this pattern. There were several students, though, whose performances strongly suggest that taking summer classes is hard on grade point average. Students who attended all three semesters tended to improve

their averages in fall and spring, dropping in the summer. This pattern supported my decision to limit the honors program to the longer terms.

CHAPTER V

BUMPY ROADS

Each honors student at Alabama Southern is, of course, unique. No two lives, no two paths, are so alike that we can know their stories without listening carefully to the individual voices of the storytellers. By listening closely to many stories, patterns may emerge to illuminate the rich tapestry of lived experiences that make up this microculture. Careful listening, though, is essential, for even people whose lives tightly intertwine with our own hold their secrets. If we put aside our assumptions and interpretations, not only near strangers but also our close companions may surprise us.

Consider, for example, Alis, whom I first met a little over 30 years ago. She befriended me when I first moved to Foley. We have remained friends throughout the years, although our frequency and intensity of contact has varied as we have moved through life's seasons. I am a participant-observer not only in general in this study, but also specifically in Alis's life story. Our relationship remained at the forefront of my awareness during our interview, which took place at her kitchen table.

On the other hand, Ivy's story was new to me. When she applied for readmission to Alabama Southern in Fall 2006, I was assigned to be her advisor. I met Ivy for the first time when she came to my office to register for classes. As we discussed the classes she wanted to take, I told her there was now an honors program in which she was welcome to participate. She was unsure it was a good idea, but after some consideration she signed

up. Until this interview, the time she spent in the honors program has been virtually our only shared history. We talked for just over an hour in my office where we first met. Listening to her renewed my appreciation of just how remarkable Ivy is. Their paths here have not been smooth, but each of these women found her way to the honors program.

An End in Itself

A woman in her mid-forties, Alis is striving to complete her Associate's degree for, in her view, no particular reason. She is taking Honors Introductory Biology. Her transcript reveals that she has already completed some upper-level biology courses for which this is a prerequisite. She has to have an introductory laboratory science sequence, though, to fulfill graduation requirements, so she is in BIO103, with BIO104 to follow during the summer unless something happens to slow her progress. She has stalled before, more than once. Otherwise, she would have finished long ago.

Alis graduated from high school in 1979. In high school, she made average grades, participated in an extracurricular activity or two, and worked part-time. She also volunteered at the local nursing home. Alis played trumpet in the marching and symphonic bands, something especially dear to her. She tried out for the band's flag corps, with disappointing results. She told me

I wanted to be a flag, and I was good at it, until I tried out and did my whole routine with my back to the judges, that kind of blew that out of the water, but it was a damn good routine, but it was just backwards. But my dad told the band director that he didn't think that would be a good thing for me to do because he

didn't like the outfits they wore, they wore shorts, and I wouldn't be playing [the trumpet].

Alis was one of the better trumpet players at the school, and at one time planned to pursue a degree in music education. However, she had to get braces on her teeth, which made playing her instrument prohibitively difficult, and that dream essentially ended. Reflecting upon this, Alis muses,

After my mother pushed and pushed and pushed me in music, they were so afraid I was going to turn out like my sister and get pregnant before marriage, and live this horrendous life, she pushed me and pushed me and pushed me in music.... So I'm not real sure why she decided one day I needed braces and to have my teeth straightened. Nobody else in the family did, but it happened.

Though she still loved music, she began to consider other options as more realistic.

Alis says,

When I graduated from Foley High School in 1979, I didn't have a clue what the future held. I didn't know there was a future. And it was very, looking back, it was very overdominated, and my father's very strong opinion was that the only reason females went to college was to get a husband or to sleep around.

Her parents were far less than supportive of her desire to go to college. Although they did allow her to attend and pay for her to do so, they strictly limited her freedom. She enrolled at the only college they would consider, the University of South Alabama. It was located about an hour from her parent's home. She says, "It was a requirement that I come home every weekend, and be home, in Baldwin County, by 3:00 on Friday afternoon. It was a very explicit requirement." Alis wanted to live in an apartment by

herself, but her mother would not agree to that arrangement. Thus, she ended up with roommates who were a good bit older than she, and who influenced her to assert her independence. Further, Alis says they encouraged her to do “things that were a bit more stupid than I would have otherwise.”

Her parents, especially her father, disapproved. His criticism about her reasons for attending college and wanting to stay on campus rather than coming home every weekend became increasingly difficult to tolerate. Not surprisingly, Alis soon found a way to escape this unpleasant tension. After completing one semester, she married a man she had met through her roommates in February 1980. Her academic career was interrupted for the first time. Alis fast forwards through this with “And then I got married and had babies.”

They moved to Louisiana, near her husband’s family. Their son Zack was born in 1982. Alis had envisioned staying home with him, but her husband was frequently unemployed, so Alis was the family’s primary wage earner. Her husband was not responsible enough to care for their baby, so she often paid a babysitter despite his physical presence at home. When Alis discovered she was expecting again in later 1983, her husband was displeased with the prospect of a second child. Indeed, Alis had little emotional support during or following either pregnancy. She says, “Um, I had babies, I had two, which several people told me I shouldn’t have the second one. Several people told me I shouldn’t have the first one. But I had them.” The marriage was on the rocks by the time their daughter Sue was born, and the couple divorced in 1986.

With two small children and few marketable skills, Alis had difficulty finding employment. Wanting to make a major change in her life, she moved with her children to

North Dakota in 1988. She said chose North Dakota solely because it was far from Alabama. There were many things about the locale that she liked, and for a while the sailing was fairly smooth. However, a personal situation that she does not care to recall brought her back to south Alabama in 1991.

Given her long-time interest in the medical field, Alis decided to become an emergency medical technician (EMT). She completed training and passed the national certification test. She accomplished this Herculean task for her despite strong opposition from her father. This training also brought her first head-on collision with gender discrimination. Of EMT training, Alis says,

That was hell. My father gave me grief because I got it through a fire department, at the time that's where they were being offered, they weren't a college credit class. And I worked my ass off for that. I stood up against rumor and ridicule from the guys, I stood up against my father, and I aced every part of the test except maternity, giving birth, childbirth, and I made a 78 on that.

Then came another roadblock. She tried for a job with a fire department and could not pass the physical agility requirement. Unable to carry a fire hose that outweighed her, something no firefighter is ever required to do, Alis failed to qualify. This requirement was, and indeed may still be, a way that women were disproportionately eliminated from the jobs with the department. She was hired as an EMT by an ambulance service, but she lost her position after only two weeks on the job because a speeding ticket on her driving record made her ineligible for coverage as an ambulance driver.

With that avenue temporarily closed to her, Alis worked at various secretarial and clerical jobs with a temporary employment service. Then, her former husband died.

Incredibly, the survivors' benefits she received were the first steady money he had ever provided for the family. With a small but dependable income, she thought it would be feasible to resume her education. Her pastor helped her a great deal during the transition back to school, offering far more than merely verbal encouragement. He recommended that she enroll in a two-year registered nursing (R.N.) program at Mobile College, a small, reputable Baptist school. He telephoned an acquaintance in the school's business office, explained Alis' situation, and arranged a meeting to discuss admission and financial aid options. This contact proved invaluable. Alis says

She mentored me through my two years at that time. I got enrolled in the nursing program. She made sure everything was done, all the way across the board. She made sure all the documentation, all the transcripts, all the financial aid, everything, the registration, right down to making sure I had the right size pencil and pen. I mean, she was just that thorough, and took me under her wing, and told me what she was doing. And so that's how I got in the nursing program.

Alis made it through the first two semesters, but then failed a mathematics test that resulted in suspension from the program. Although she could have applied for readmission the following semester, she did not. She found her failure of the test embarrassing, and she was weighed down by family responsibilities. By then, her pre-teenaged children were becoming increasingly "challenging," and her parents could not be depended upon to assist with them. Although both children were bright, neither was a particularly cooperative or motivated scholar, and both were prone to disciplinary problems. Alis felt unable to sustain her efforts in nursing school.

She moved the family to Florida and went back to work. This time she landed a job she really liked at a hospital. This position combined her interest in medicine with her experience as a bookkeeper, and she began to think she might want to be a hospital administrator. The hospital was sold, and a resulting transfer found her relocated back to Louisiana where she worked for the hospital's administrator. Soon, however, single parenthood again overwhelmed her. One day, her work routine was interrupted by an official visit from a police officer inquiring about her child-care arrangements. Her neighbor had reported that her children, now teenagers, were disturbing the peace by fighting and destroying their apartment. Alis says

They were having an argument and woke up the downstairs neighbor who happened to be a night cop. He called the cops because he was off duty. And he told them they were tearing the place up, and putting holes in walls, and everything else. There were no holes in the walls, nothing was damaged. They were just stomping around. My daughter is very good at stomping.

Alis lost her job as a result of this incident.

With no other recourse, Alis moved back to Alabama to be near her parents once again. Reasoning that she might as well return to school, she went back to Mobile College, now known as University of Mobile. Unwilling to return to nursing, Alis tried business administration with the goal of becoming a hospital administrator. She attended a semester or two with some success. In the fall of 1999, she attended her 20 year high school reunion and reconnected with Steve, a high school crush. He had entered the Navy immediately after graduation and had recently retired. He had never married. They started seeing each other immediately and were engaged on New Year's Day, 2000. They

married that spring. To her surprise, this made it no easier for her to complete her degree because “My husband did not believe in college.” Although Alis says he saw himself as “rescuing me from my living conditions,” the difficulties with her children escalated. Her 14-year-old daughter threatened suicide and was hospitalized for evaluation. Steve had trouble adjusting to his role as the stepfather of not only this troubled girl but also a 16-year-old boy. Alis gave up the idea of finishing college, at least for a while.

As time passed, her children accepted the marriage and tensions eased somewhat. Then, her daughter got married and quickly became pregnant. Sue’s marriage rapidly deteriorated. To make a long story short, Alis soon found herself with custody of her infant granddaughter, Kelly. Steve found civilian employment unsatisfactory, so he found a job as a security system technician contracting with the federal government, working out of the country for months at a stretch. They moved to Maryland to facilitate his travel out of Washington, DC. Once again, Alis was raising a small child essentially alone. After some time, the conditions of Steve’s work changed, no longer requiring him to fly out of DC, so Alis moved back to Alabama. This time, though, she moved to Monroeville. Kelly was now old enough for kindergarten, making day-time childcare a less pressing issue at last. Alis decided to enter school once again. This time, she has no mission other than to graduate:

Well, it’s relevant for me to finish my degree just for a personal level of finishment. Just to say it’s finished, to finish something. To accomplish something. Closure. And basically because I’ve been told all my life it’s not necessary, it’s not needed, and you can’t do it. I just want to show *me* that I can do it.

So far, though, it has not been easy. Alis's first semester ended with a GPA of 2.8 and an honors credit. When she registered this past fall, she had mapped out a plan that would let her graduate in August 2008. However, for reasons she cannot quite explain, she dropped two classes. As a result, she will not finish until at least December. There is a trade-off though. Honors courses are not available during the summer, but she can be an Honors Program Graduate if she decides to complete two honors courses in the fall.

Alis says her main reason for participating in the honors program is not academic. She has told no one in her family except for her husband that she is in it at all. For her, the main benefit is that it forces her to be sociable and participate in things she would otherwise avoid. It helps her feel a part of the community. She knows that that support is essential. She expresses it this way:

If you don't have any support on finishing, being an adult and going back to school and finishing, and having children all at the same time, and you have no emotional support, it just ain't gonna happen. I don't care who you are. You have to have some kind of moral support on a consistent day-to-day basis. Helping you, encouraging you, whether it just be by picking your kids up and giving them dinner, and not bitching and moaning and groaning about it, to saying here, let me fix you a cup of coffee, you've probably had a long day with work and school.

Alis's story, while unique, exemplifies the struggles many students encounter. Her lack of emotional support from her family, her frequent moves because of financial and personal pressures, her responsibilities outside of school, her insecurity about her abilities, and the real and perceived social pressures she feels are not uncommon challenges for women from working-class backgrounds. Consistent with the women

Wendy Luttrell (1997) studied, Alis was programmed to accept that higher education is desirable for women who are essentially failures as women and thus must support themselves; successful women, by definition, have husbands who pay all the bills. They do not work outside the home because they do not have to earn money. Preparing for a career is planning to fail. With this mindset, college is unnecessary and frivolous, something of an affectation. It might be convenient, in the event that a marriage ends, to be able to support oneself, but it is preferable to remarry quickly. Alis's comments indicate that this was her parents' viewpoint, and at least to some extent, Alis has bought into it, too.

An Unfinished Symphony

Ivy's road has been no smoother than Alis's. Born to a 16-year-old single mother, she lived with her grandparents until her grandfather died when Ivy was 13 years old. Afterwards, her grandmother raised her alone. Ivy describes herself as "pretty much a straight A, maybe every now and then a B, student" at Murphy High School in Mobile, Alabama. She expected military service upon her high school graduation in May 1992. However, her life took an unexpected twist.

On April 17, 1992, Ivy met with the recruiter to finish registering to enter the service. Everything changed in an instant:

I was actually in Montgomery doing my physical for the Navy when I found out—that's how I found out I was pregnant, and they called me back and told me that I was pregnant, my blood test had come back and I was pregnant, so of course I couldn't join the Navy.

Caught off guard, Ivy returned home. She says:

I left there, went back home to Mobile, and the guy—it was actually kind of rude—but so otherwise I might have actually chose to go back to the Navy. But the recruiter made a comment to me, if I decided to abort the baby, to come back and see him. Anyway, that was on a Tuesday, and on Saturday I miscarried.

Although it might seem as though she had dodged a bullet and could proceed with her plans to graduate and enter military service with no disruption, she surprised herself by refusing to return to school. “I was just hard-headed,” she says. “I mean, I remember looking back and thinking, ‘I’ve done my time.’” As is so often the case in late spring, “All we were pretty much doing at that point was graduation exercises, and having fun anyway, and I just felt like, ‘You know, I’ve served my 13 years of school, why am I doing this again?’” School officials offered to let her “walk” in her high school graduation ceremony and finish her diploma that summer. She was not interested, and the opportunity passed. She felt she had let all of the teachers down, and she did not want to face them. She says, “I had one teacher that I was very, very close to. She was my business co-op teacher, and I felt like I had let her down, and all my other teachers, but especially her, and my grandmother.”

Her grandmother, teachers, and school advised her to go back to school the next fall and graduate. She said she would only agree if she could attend a different school. “That went fine for about two weeks,” and then she quit again. She got a GED the next summer, and, to show her grandmother she was trying to get herself back on track, she began taking classes at Southeastern School of Technology, which is now known as Remington College.

Later that fall, she married the father of the baby she had miscarried. She became pregnant again almost immediately. Their son was stillborn. Ivy's doctor told her that she would never be able to carry a baby to term. She says, "So after that my goal was to have a baby because the doctors told me I would not ever carry a baby to full term, I would never have one, so I worked on trying to get pregnant." The family moved to Monroeville, her husband's home, and in Fall 1994, she began taking classes at Alabama Southern Community College. Her heart was not in it, though, and she completed the quarter with a 1.16 GPA and an academic warning.

Ivy had some difficulty becoming pregnant this time, but she could think of nothing else that mattered as much to her at that point. To console herself and fill her days, Ivy enrolled at the University of South Alabama in Mobile. Soon, however, she was delighted to find that she was again expecting a baby. "I started going to school a little," she said, "and then ended up pregnant with her, and immediately quit school because the doctor told me I had to be on bed rest if I was going to have a viable baby at all. That was more important to me." Her decision to stay home apparently paid off, as she gave birth to a healthy baby girl. When Taylor was about a year old, Ivy and her husband divorced. To pay her bills, Ivy got a job at a convenience store. She briefly returned to Alabama Southern, but once again she encountered difficulty. With two F's and a W, her transcript shows a GPA of 0.0 for the quarter. She was placed on academic probation.

Ivy tried college again in Spring 1997, but withdrew from all her classes that semester. After that, she decided to stay home with Taylor. She remembers this difficult time:

I tried to go back to school after her, couldn't do it, couldn't bring myself to leave her. I just had this attachment phobia, you know, and that's what I really think it was, was a phobia, because I had already lost two [babies], and I just couldn't bring myself to be away from her. So anyway, after that I didn't go back to school for the longest time.

Needing help supporting herself and her baby, she moved to back to Mobile to be near her own family.

Ivy landed a job at Mobile Infirmary, but she soon saw that she needed more education to improve her earning potential. She decided to enter nursing school at Bishop State Community College and attended for a year and a half. She married her current husband James and moved back to Monroeville before she was able to complete the program. Her husband began encouraging her to return to school and complete her degree. She decided that she did not particularly want to be a nurse, so she changed her major to education. Her passion is history, and she wants to share it with young people by teaching high school. With this goal in mind, she re-enrolled at Alabama Southern in Spring 1998 but withdrew before the end of the semester when she learned she was pregnant again. She and her new husband soon had a son, Nathan, and Ivy spent the next few years at home with her children. She tried again in Spring 2001. She did not want to be away from her children and again withdrew before the end of the semester.

In Fall 2006, Ivy returned to school one more time. This time, her barriers were no longer insurmountable. Her husband was supportive, her children were in school themselves, and Ivy was able to focus on her studies. Ivy completed her degree in three

semesters, earning excellent grades. Much like her record in high school, Ivy received mostly A's, an occasional B, and one C. Ivy remembers

That was the one thing I hated about my last semester here, was the one class—the class that was supposed to be my major—that I decided to make a C in was history because I decided to take 15 hours, and I sat back and just kind of relaxed in history and even [the instructor] would look at me like, “What is wrong with you?” Because, I mean, I got the history award at Award Night, and he would look at me like, “What is wrong with you?” But I was taking speech and Lit. II and Pre-cal and something else and history... Yeah, I was just like, “History will wait. History's going to be my life for the next how many years?” So but then when I saw that C, I was not happy.

It seems ironic that this C would be an issue for her, given the grades on her transcript: in her first three attempts at Alabama Southern, she collected one D, three F's, and eight W's.

Like Alis, Ivy has faced many obstacles to completing her education. Dropping out of high school, lacking social support, divorcing, single parenting, financial constraints are all barriers. Ivy dealt with these and more. She overcame them sufficiently to obtain her associate's degree, completing the honor's program requirements in the process. She is still struggling, though, to meet her goal of becoming a high school teacher.

Currently, Ivy is taking an unplanned break from her enrollment at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM). She started at AUM in Fall 2007. With five classes,

she made four A's and one B. She was carpooling with another education student, but the other woman only passed one of the five classes. So, according to Ivy,

she told me that she was going to come back here and take Finite [math] and some biologies that she still needed, and I don't need anything else so of course you know gas \$3.00 a gallon I can't drive back and forth up there, by myself every day, so I said well I'll just take a semester off, and I'll stay at home for a semester with the kids. She said okay, so I didn't register for classes or anything, so right as school was getting ready to start, she called me and said "What's your schedule?" I said, "What do you mean what is my schedule? I didn't register!" And she said that she was going to go back, which she didn't. She wound up coming here but— anyway, she came back [to Alabama Southern] and she after a couple of weeks quit school, so I took a semester off.

Logistical challenges prevent completing the program in a timely way. Ivy has decided not to set a firm deadline for graduation. She told me

I had it set in my mind that I had to graduate by a certain day, so that I could get a job by a certain date, and it was too stressful to do that. Because [AUM's] schedule, it's not like getting classes here, it's not. So I said, "Never mind, I'm not going to stress over that, I will graduate when I graduate—[My friend] has been there forever, trying to get a degree. She told me, she said, "You need not try to graduate by a certain date, because you will not graduate—I will graduate one day, hopefully within the next two and a half years, three years at the most. That's my goal, but I'm not going to set a date.

In addition to her full-time classes, Ivy is the assistant manager of a local restaurant. She started working there in order to pay for her commute the hundred or so miles each way to Montgomery to attend classes. Her children are now 10 and 12 years old, and she sees herself as their primary caregiver. Being a good parent is important to her, and she feels better about the care her children receive if she provides it herself. She describes him as a good father, but she knows that James is less attentive than she is. In addition, he works nights, so he has to sleep during the afternoon. He sees his role in household chores as “helping out.” Ivy says

I have a wonderful husband, but you know they go to work, come home, God help him. He helps, but I have to ask him. He doesn't complain about helping, it's just, I said, “Why do I have to tell you what I need you to do, why can't you just look around, see what needs to be done and do it?” And somebody was talking about that the other day, and I said they just don't think the way we do, that's all I can figure out, because they honestly seem to think their only responsibility in life is to get up and go to work. Their only direct responsibility that they have to think about doing, otherwise they need to be directed in the path they need to go.

Running a house, parenting children, working, and going to school two hours away are a tall order. When Ivy graduates, her degree will represent something of great value.

Also like Alis, Ivy has had to shake off a great deal of emotional baggage in her quest to succeed. Her self-confidence was undermined by people who insisted she should settle for, as she says, “just whatever.” Throughout her life, she dealt with “so many other people acting like I couldn't do it, such as my ex-husband, or that I shouldn't do it, there

was no need for me to go to college, there was no need.” About protracted college career, she says

It took me a long time to get the self-esteem that I needed to finish my degree. It took me, I mean, I was 32 when I graduated, and it shouldn't have, but it's because of certain people that have beat me down to that point, made me feel like there was no reason for me to have one, or maybe I didn't deserve to have one.

The “certain people,” she told me, were her ex-husband and her mother. She went on, Especially the mother. That's a long story in itself. I'm not even going to hash that, except just that all through my life she made me feel like I was the reason she never had anything. That I ruined her life because she got pregnant with me when she was 15, and had me when she was 16, and that I would never amount to anything, so I made it my personal goal to prove her differently the same as I made it my personal goal to be a good mother, because she wasn't.

About her husband, Ivy says

It was always some reason I should not go to school. Always some reason if I did start a semester I couldn't finish it, whether it be that he let it be about money, even though I was getting student loans that I still pay on today, or whatever reason, it was always some reason. I think it probably was more about I would have wound up making more money than he did.

I asked Ivy what had kept her going. She identified her husband, children, and grandmother as primary motivators:

I knew that all my life growing up she wanted so bad for me to go to college and have a good life and be happy, so it made it real easy. And I kept telling my

husband before she dies, before she dies, I want her to see me walk across the stage. And I didn't care if it was two-year or four-year I didn't care. I just wanted her to see me walk across a stage, and she did. She cried.

Ivy also wanted to prove the naysayers in her history wrong by making something of herself. For many reasons, walking across the stage to get her degree and other awards was deeply meaningful to Ivy. That is why she took on the challenge of the honors program, which she completed during its first year of existence:

I honestly did not think for years and years that I would deserve to do that. So when I walked across that stage last year, and I know people kept looking at me thinking why in the heck is she doing—not the degree, but just like the honors program and the leadership medallion. And I know several people would ask me, “Why are you doing that?” I said, “To prove I can.” And somebody asked me one night, “What’s the point? It’s just one little added thing.” I said, “Because when I walk across that stage, on graduation night, I’m going to know I could, and it doesn’t matter what anybody else thinks or know. I’m gonna know I could.” And then, the one person, which I wanted my grandmother there because for obvious reasons, and she was there. My dad was there. My mother was in a coma. She wasn’t there.

Ivy gave her mother a picture of herself in her regalia, nonetheless, and she intends to make sure her mother is there when she finally receives her bachelor’s degree.

Ivy also identified her love for history and her desire to teach as factors that have kept her going. She worries that she may not find a job in Monroe County because generally history is taught by coaches in the local school system. Ivy says, though, that if

she cannot teach what she loves, she will not teach at all. She says, “If I have to teach math, no. If I have to teach language, no. History! I want to teach history!” She continues, “And I refuse. I mean I am one of those people, I refuse to, if I have something I really want to do, I’m not going to let anything stand in my way. It’s that simple. Not anything within reason.” Her determination sets her apart from many other students.

Finally, Ivy notes that her faith in God kept her afloat during difficult times. It is extraordinary that Ivy was able to, as she says, “wake up one morning and realize I did deserve to do this.” Many in similar situations fall prey to destructive messages that destroy self-esteem. Ivy might easily have followed the path her mother predicted for her. Instead, she did something many cannot. She says, matter of factly,

I just sat in my living room one day, and I decided, you know, I can’t change her. I might as well love her for who she is. People have to love me for who I am, but I can’t change her. She’s done many, many things that I don’t agree with, but she’s my mother, she gave birth to me. I have to respect her. And so I prayed, and I’ve had a completely different attitude to her, with her ever since. She’s changed a little, and hopefully she’ll continue, but prayer and faith have definitely gotten me through school *and* all that.

Ivy sees her education as a work in progress and the honors she earned as the beginning of much more to come. When our interview ended, she left my office with a promise to invite me to her graduation from AUM. What an honor that would be for me.

Two Exceptional Persons

Alis and Ivy, as far as I know, have never met, yet I can imagine their agreeing about so much. They described similar challenges, after all, particularly related to husbands and family, financial and personal pressures, responsibilities outside of school, self-confidence, and messages that shaped their self-images regarding higher education. Ivy did not have the script that said only second-class women need higher education, as Alis did. The messages she got said that successful women were college educated and financially successful, and that she would never accomplish that.

Alis and Ivy are still defying the odds as they endeavor to reach their educational goals. Alis' best chance for success was when she first went to college as an 18-year-old traditional student. Her father's requirement that she leave campus every weekend, however, limited her involvement on campus. He encouraged her to be more committed to being his daughter than to becoming a college student. She fell prey to low engagement, a predictor of attrition (e.g., Tinto, 1993). Ivy's dropping out of high school and subsequent delay in entering college decreased her odds of attaining a degree.

A report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP; 2007) focuses on working poor students, which both Alis and Ivy were during much of their early adulthoods. The authors note that full-time enrollment is a major predictor of degree completion, and that working poor students are frequently confronted with financial challenges that preclude taking a full load: "Given their work and other responsibilities, it is difficult for them to enroll full time, thus making it harder for them to receive financial aid and complete necessary coursework" (p. 1). Redden (2007) says, "Despite the fact that the working poor who take college courses think of themselves as students first and

employees second, their work place commitments, financial stressors and familial obligations pose particular challenges to full-time attendance and degree completion” (p. 1).

As they became wives, mothers, and then single mothers, their likelihood of meeting their educational goals diminished at every turn. Fairchild (2003) described some of the primary difficulties faced by nontraditional students. She identified social, personal, and institutional complications to their academic success. Between them, Ivy and Alis encountered most of them.

CHAPTER VI

THE FIRST PARTICIPANTS: HEARING THEIR VOICES

Some students' voices are loud and clear—brave, bold, and assertive. Among the students contacted for this study, I found these voices concentrated among the high achievers and the program completers, those students who might be expected to feel the most empowered within the collegiate context. Other voices are mere whispers. The lower achievers, and students who took a chance but later retreated, were reluctant to speak out. What does their silence mean? Could it be that they do not really believe their opinions are important? For these less vocal but no less valuable informants, I had to provide an especially encouraging space and listen particularly carefully to their responses.

Both the Monroeville and Thomasville campuses have informal meeting areas equipped with tables and chairs, vending machines, and wireless Internet access. Students are encouraged gathering in these places, but they rarely do so. I often hold seminar meetings in these rooms because they are comfortable and familiar, but far enough out of the main campus traffic to yield some privacy as well. In addition, I could serve snacks there, so I chose them as the locations for the focus group interviews.

Voices in Harmony

The first focus group consisted of the six students who completed the two-year program in a single year. The research suggests that traditional students who have few

distractions would be most likely to accomplish such goals, but these students defy that prediction (Tinto, 1993). All are busy, capable, confident women, who among them face virtually every identified obstacle to persistence and degree attainment.

These range in age from 19 to 56 years. Markita and Hannah were single and right out of high school; the others were older students with children. Mary was a divorced mother raising teenagers while in the program, a newlywed at the time of the interview. Five held steady jobs working twenty hours a week or more while enrolled in school full-time. Markita worked weekends in Birmingham, a 400 mile round trip, in order to pay for her classes. Their transcripts showed variety in their academic histories, too. They were generally above average with the exception of Ivy, whose story was shared in a previous chapter. Her unimpressive academic record met the criteria to be included in the “low achievement” group as well as in this focus group.

Understandably, they entered the program with some reservations. Mary, Annie, and Amanda all agreed with Ivy when she said, “It sounded too easy. I expected it to be a lot more work than it actually was at first. Not that it wasn’t a lot of work!” The three who had gone through the nursing program did so during a transitional time, and found that at times rules changed in mid-stream. Therefore, they were skeptical that there was no risk involved in writing a contract that they might not be able to fulfill. They were dubious that the seminar grade would be based solely on in-class participation. In Annie’s words

I think I was expecting, even though we only had to meet once a month, I was expecting more work, more paperwork and that sort of had me nervous. As a

nursing student, we don't have a lot of time. We are in clinicals all the time, and everybody else has their other stuff going on, too, and I know that was the thing that concerned me, that "Do I have time to take on more paperwork?" And I was really happy there wasn't any!

She was pleased, and obviously surprised.

These students wanted their experiences to be meaningful—they did not expect or want something for nothing. They were not interested in pointless activities. They described the decision to enter the honors program as "scary," and they reserved the right to withdraw if it became overwhelming or if it was not interesting, fun, and productive for them. The overriding themes that emerged from this group were "I like a worthwhile challenge," and "I like to be recognized for my accomplishment." Markita spoke for the group when she said, "Being among the select few to graduate with honors assured me that my persistence and commitment to excellence did not go unnoticed."

Amanda is the hands-down spokesperson regarding the desirability of appropriate recognition for her hard work. When the program began, she only had three classes left to take. She needed to complete four honors contracts to complete the program. So, she petitioned to be allowed to do a contract for a course she completed the previous semester in order to fulfill program requirements. This petition was granted. When I asked her why it meant enough to her to take that on, she told me

I had worked really, really, really hard at that point with all my classes, and I wanted to be a part of the group. It seemed like it was going to be exciting, that it

was going to be interesting, and I just wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to earn whatever honors were out there to earn, within my power.

To my query about the most satisfying experiences, Annie, the most senior member of the group, said, “Walking across that stage!” Her remark drew a chorus of agreement. Was the extra work and stress worth it? All of these participants assured me it was. Mary said, “I think too it gave you a sense of accomplishment. I think it was worth that. I felt like I accomplished something nobody else did.”

A key question for this group was why they decided to join the honors program with only one year to complete it. Their answers were that it sounded like fun, they dared each other, and they thought it could be beneficial in their future academic or employment endeavors. Markita believed the program would provide encouragement, enriching experiences, and lasting friendships with like-minded students. When they signed up, they were cautiously optimistic about their likelihood of success.

Their experiences were not all smooth sailing, however. Three of these students had actively sought to abort one or more of their honors projects, a decision which would have kept them from completing the program. In fact, after only a few weeks in the program, Hannah informed her advisor that she was not going to continue. Her advisor, who was also one of her contract mentors, was unsure about the logistics of withdrawing from the program or ending a contract, so she contacted me. I told her that Hannah could simply inform her instructors that she was not going to fulfill her contract, and that dropping the seminar was a matter of doing the same things she would do to drop any course. I told her advisor, though, that Hannah could stay in IDS115 regardless of the

status of her contracts, and she had nothing to lose by doing so. I said I would be glad to explain her options to her, but I had not yet met Hannah because she had not attended the first seminar. Her advisor said she would tell her what I had said, and encourage her to speak with me about it as well.

Hannah called me, and after our discussion, she decided that she would attend the next meeting before she decided how to proceed. Once she understood that the seminar would be fun, take only a day or less per month of her time, and give her the opportunity to earn an A for the one hour of credit even if she did not complete the projects she had planned, Hannah decided to remain in the program. Once she completed the first semester, she was enthusiastic about her accomplishments. She did not hesitate to enroll the second semester and did not consider dropping from the program during the second semester.

Late in the second semester both Annie and Mary came close to bailing out of at least one of their contracts. Both women found the demands of the nursing program overwhelming and were afraid that their work would be less than their best. They did not want to turn in substandard projects and thought they would be better off jettisoning their contracts altogether. Each of these students, remember, took on two projects each semester in order to be Honors Graduates. Each talked to me about her concerns. Annie was literally in tears about her workload on more than one occasion.

Knowing that they both tended to ask more of themselves than most instructors would ever expect, I suspected that they were capable of success despite their apprehension. Therefore, I convinced both of them that nothing bad would result if they

turned in projects their instructors found less than satisfactory. I suggested they ask for extensions on their target dates for completion, reminding them that if they did not ask, there was no chance for negotiation. Though it was something of a leap of faith, they approached their instructors for extensions that got approved. Both finished their projects, and thus their contracts and the program, successfully.

When I asked them to recall their considerations about quitting the program, only Markita reported that she never came close. Annie replied, "Every semester!" Reminded that there were only two, she amended her comment to "Every project! And there were four of those!" Mary came close to discontinuing a project; she said,

Especially the last one. That's when we were precepting, and had clinicals, and had all that classwork and exams and it was like just one more thing to do. You know, I was like, I just don't have time to do that. But I did.

This line of discussion continued this way:

Annie: [But] you can't quit.

Amanda: It's against our grain to quit. I'm NOT going to quit.

Annie: After all, we hadn't quit school, and Lord knows, we had thought about that, too!

Amanda: We thought about that every day. Daily.

Annie: Well, actually, we were more concerned about them quitting us because of bad grades!

They all laughed, but their sentiments were obviously sincere.

Looking back, Annie expressed a touch of regret about the quality of her projects: [Completing two projects] can be done! But it could be done better. I'll be the first to admit my papers weren't top notch because I did not have the time to make them; had I just had one a semester, I could have gotten more detail, you know, gotten more into it, but when you are trying to divide it up and do it two a semester, you just really don't have time to end up giving it your best effort.

These students generally expressed mixed feelings about their projects. They appreciated the freedom of tailoring their projects to their own interests. The projects they designed and carried out were meaningful and informative and required considerable effort. Once again, they wanted to earn recognition by doing something significant. They estimated that each project required about 25 hours to complete.

Asked about their most satisfying and most frustrating experiences, these women gave specific, concrete responses. They all enjoyed the motivational speaker who taught about "Seven Habits of Highly Effective Students" based on Steven Covey's (1989) work. Amanda told me, "That was the best. I went in that morning going, 'How long am I going to have to sit here?' And I left feeling like, shoulders back, 'I'm ready.'" They liked all of the group meetings, even those that centered on paperwork, because they offered opportunities to interact with the other students. Hearing about the individual projects done by others was encouraging. They spoke of the other seminars as providing excuses to have fun, something they might not take the time to do otherwise, while learning something new.

Their frustrations included a planned field experience to an archaeological dig that got rained out. They were quite disappointed by that. Watching the documentary *Invisible Soldiers* (Poole, 2006), a movie about children pressed into military service, was less than a favorite. After discussion, though, they reinterpreted it as worthwhile but depressing rather than a frustrating experience. They experienced frustration with various aspects of completing their projects but found them more positive than negative, overall. For example, Amanda said, “My frustration was when I sat down to write that paper.” Later, she elaborated,

I enjoyed my projects. I didn't enjoy writing the paper at the end, but I enjoyed the projects. I enjoyed getting the feedback, like with the school, the teachers that I did, and doing the echo, doing the different things that I did. I actually enjoyed the research part.

They concurred that choosing topics and creating projects geared to their own interests and strengths was an especially appealing aspect of the honors program.

These students found the program valuable enough to make them persevere. So, despite the demands on their time and energy, all of these students not only graduated, but did so with distinction. Amanda, Mary, and Annie completed associate's degrees in nursing. They are all now employed full time at the local hospital. Amanda was honored for special distinction in the nursing program at her pinning ceremony. Hannah graduated summa cum laude with her associate's in Business Technology and is now working at a bank near her hometown, exactly as she had hoped to do. Markita and Ivy are pursuing

bachelor's degrees while continuing to hold jobs. The students realize that they did something rather extraordinary. Ivy put it this way:

I get tired of hearing like these baseball players who whine, their mama and daddy paying their way through college. They don't have to work, they always have money in their pocket, and they're making C's and D's. Saying, "I don't ever have time to do anything! I can't keep up with my work!" And I'm going, "I'm going to school, I'm raising two kids, I work part time, I take care of my house, I have a husband, I cook, I clean, and I still make A's and B's. So what's your point?"

These students strongly asserted that the program was beneficial and that they would definitely recommend that other students participate. Before I could ask the question, they gave me suggestions for the program's future. First, they asked that I publish some sort of newsletter to keep former students informed and involved, so that they could attend some activities after they graduate. "I love the meetings," said Annie. Amanda agreed: "I love to hear the different speakers, and the meetings were interesting." As to the program itself, they told me not to add any requirements to the program. "I think you'd lose a lot more students," Annie commented. They said the program needs more publicity in the local paper as well as on campus, such as a bulletin board for the students to maintain. "It will mean even more when people know about it, what it is and how it works—what it is worth," Markita told me. She suggested

I would like to see more publicity on campus about the program and important events that the honors program sponsors, possibly one major community service

project that would take place annually and would bring the community together and give everyone something to look forward to each year.

The interactions among these women were lively and rapid, with everyone speaking at once at times. One would often say, “You know that!” or “Oh, yes!” when another was speaking, and they nodded along and even occasionally finished sentences for each other. The hour and a half that we spent together passed quickly for me, and I left this group feeling energized.

Can Anybody Hear Me?

Several days after the first focus group met, I waited with anticipation for the second group to arrive. The eight students invited to participate in this group were all African American females. All but one was a traditional college student within a year or two of high-school graduation, though two had small children. Like the first group, none of these women was still enrolled at Alabama Southern. Unlike the first group, though, only half of them had graduated at the time of this study.

I never had the privilege of knowing most of these women well. The exception is Tina, whom you have already met (pages 49, 72, 78-79), who took my general psychology class twice and later travelled to Washington, D.C. and New York City. She graduated in August 2007. She completed three honors contracts. Like Tina, most of these students had been in one or more of my classes prior to enrolling in the honors program, enjoying varying degrees of success in those courses.

I was pleased but surprised when Shanta applied for the program since she had previously made a D, then later a C, in my psychology class. She also took sociology and

made a C. She took the second psychology course concurrently with IDS115 and made another D. Even though she was my student for four semesters, Shanta and I never had an extended conversation outside class. She graduated with a 2.2 GPA after only one semester in the program, and she completed no honors contracts. Yasmin had transferred to Alabama Southern and entered the program her first semester here. Upon earning a GPA below 1.5, though, she was placed on academic suspension after her first semester. She has continued to take courses, and though she is still on probation, she is making progress toward graduation. Tanya, had begun taking classes the summer immediately after high school graduation. One of the courses she took that summer was introductory psychology. I remember her comment to her classmates that she was a little scared because she thought she was the youngest person in the class. Her first two semesters were reasonably successful. However, in spring semester, she began to make failing grades, including an F in a psychology class with me. She was a sophomore when the program began, and she started the program with a GPA of 1.879. Her academic performance continued to be markedly poor that semester, and when it ended, she carried a GPA of 1.563. This record resulted in a one-semester suspension from which she has not returned. Lola and Stella enrolled only the first semester and failed to attend enough sessions or complete alternate assignments to earn A grades in IDS115. Neither has attended Alabama Southern since that semester. Stella attempted introductory psychology in Spring 2006 but withdrew; she tried again in Fall 2006 but failed the course.

Of the students in this category, Faith is the only one I consider to have, for want of a better description, fallen through the cracks. Faith had made an F in general

psychology in Summer 2006 but wanted to enroll in honors because, she said, she liked me. In Fall 2006, Faith was a sophomore with a GPA of 1.9. She withdrew from the seminar well after midterm, although she had attended faithfully and would have most likely earned an A in the class. Despite the requirement that an instructor approve withdrawal, Faith was removed from my roll without contacting me. She effectively disappeared as far as I was concerned, so I was unable to tell her that she would benefit from staying in the class. She did not attend college spring semester, and she was able to graduate in August 2007, but I had no further contact with her.

For their various reasons, and in stark contrast with the first focus group, not one single person came to this meeting. Not one. As I sat waiting, my disappointment grew. I immediately issued a second invitation that would require less travel for some of the students; again, no response. I had anticipated a lower attendance, but I was surprised that not one student responded. After considering my options, I concluded that it would not be appropriate to contact the students again. I knew I needed the data that only these students could provide, but I did not want my eagerness for their participation to begin to resemble coercion or pressure.

Fortunately, I had the opportunity to hear from three of these students in informal interview settings. I saw Tina working at a local fast-food restaurant a few days later. She told me she had received the letter and thought about coming, but changed her mind. I asked her to talk to me about that decision, and she complied. I later had similar interactions with two others and found that Tina's answers were typical. I encountered Stella at the cash register as I checked out at a local store, and I came across Shanta

pushing her cart at the grocery store. Although they did not assemble on cue in a focus group and speak out in the prescribed format, they still spoke.

Each told me in her own way that the formal invitation and informed consent letter that worked for some people did not work for them. Stella's "I didn't know what it was, what it was for," says it well. They did not understand its contents at first, and they neither re-read it nor asked for clarification. Even though I included my name, return address, email address, and telephone numbers and invited questions about the contents of the letter, at least to my own satisfaction, these students did not respond. "It looked too official to be important," one student remarked. She explained that since she no longer attends Alabama Southern, she saw no reason to respond to any correspondence from the college. I asked each of them whether she had thought of contacting me about it. The short, simple answer was, "No." It should not be assumed that they were entirely unresponsive. On the contrary, they asked around to try to find others who had received the letters. They found no one who had received a letter, which made the request all the more mysterious. With no peers to consult, each woman decided independently not to participate. Stella told me, "Nobody around here knew anything about it."

Given the settings of these conversations, I did not ask all of the questions I had planned for the focus group. I did not press the issue that I initially planned to explore, and therefore got little information about their rationale for entering the program despite their previous academic records. I did ask about their most frustrating and most satisfying experiences. They enjoyed the group meetings, but they did not like the paperwork requirements or the level of personal initiative required to complete their contracts. They

had difficulty following the process through to its end to ensure that they successfully met their goals. They would all recommend that others participate in the program because it had been, in the words of Shanta, “really fun and not all that hard.” They shared no suggestions for improvement, although I am sure they could have. Even though I assured them that I could only get the information I needed if they were candid with me, I had the feeling that they were genuinely skeptical that I really wanted frank criticism. I gave each former student my contact information and asked that she feel free to get in touch if she had any other comments to share with me.

Kudzu Communication and Other Concerns

In the late 1930s, well-meaning Southern farmers planted kudzu to control erosion. It grew so well that it has become a pest weed that chokes out other foliage. Once it invades an area, it is nearly impossible to eradicate. In much the same way, misinformation can overwhelm correct information. So-called grapevines are dependable message networks that bypass official channels. I think of informal systems that give questionable information as “kudzu communication.” I thought of this analogy often as I coded this data because in one way or another, many students told me that they had chosen not to participate in the honors program because the information they had was wrong or they had no information at all. Some comments that conveyed these themes were written on surveys distributed to students who met predetermined selection criteria for inclusion in this study, primarily high achievers who have never participated in the program. Some of them came from individual conversations I had with current and former program participants in my role as program director. I am not referring to these as

interviews, for they were brief, informal exchanges with students rather than planned interactions with selected research participants. The single survey returned by a student who did not continue in the program falls into another category: she simply found herself overwhelmed with the desire to graduate while working and planning her wedding. This response type will be discussed later.

Great variety shows up among comments falling in the category of “erroneous information.” There was misinformation about availability, transferability, structure, workload, and student characteristics. At least one respondent listed each of these as a major reason they had not chosen to participate even though the program was, in some ways, appealing. For example, one student told me that she did not participate because “Auburn University won’t accept our program.” One noted confidently that the program was “obviously great for younger students, but I am not in that group.” Another indicated that it was not intended for dual-enrolled high school students. The student answered the survey question “How did you decide not to participate in the program?” with a matter of fact, “I’m still in high school.” Some said the program was unavailable to students on their home campus. Each semester, students who meet each of these descriptions have been in the program. These inaccuracies could be easily corrected if good information was available in an accessible format.

The origin of these errors remains a mystery. Follow up interviews with these students revealed nothing of substance. The source of the information, when identified, was generally, “I was told...” When I asked, “By whom?” not one student could give confident response. Each admitted not knowing why they believed what they did. I asked

whether they had thought about asking me, the identified program director. None had considered doing so despite that my name, title, and contact information appear in each and every print and on-line honors program publication.

One student surprised me with “I was unaware that ASCC [Alabama Southern Community College] had an honors program.” This lack springs from a related issue. Breaches in the communication network have various consequences. All of the associated incarnations are a frequent source of annoyance to my students and to me, and so will be treated at length in “Intersections.”

In addition to students who never participated, those who entered the program but either withdrew mid-semester or did not register for the honors seminar the following term were particularly likely to report having acted on inaccurate information. For example, a student told me she failed to sign up again because she dropped down to part-time status and believed that the program was unavailable to part-time students. It is difficult to detect a basis for this belief. No written information contains any reference to full- versus part-time status. Happily, though, I happened to notice this withdrawal immediately and contacted the student, who re-enrolled once she had correct information.

The most common misconception among students who dropped mid-semester apparently occurred because other students or faculty affirmed their erroneous assumptions. They tended to think that if they were unable to complete their contracts, their grades in the honors seminar would be significantly lowered as a consequence. They did not believe that the program was really “no risk.” One student told me, “When I told

my teacher I wasn't going to finish the work for my contract, she said to drop your class right away, while there was still time before you had to give me an F."

Another common barrier to enrollment derives from priority and time management. Students often report some variation of "I don't have time" as their primary reason for choosing to exit the program or not to enroll at all. For example, one survey respondent said, "I feel I have too much on my plate." Another wrote, "I work a part-time job; could not take on anything extra without my grades suffering." More than one student has concluded that personal relationships were more pressing than taking on additional obligations at school. A previously enthusiastic participant exited the program because of her upcoming marriage; another highly capable student whose work habits are excellent and whose grade point average reflects her potential decided not to participate because she could not figure out how to fit the seminars into her schedule.

Objectively, some students' schedules really are packed, while others are fairly open, and their subjective reports about their time commitments reflect factors not always evident to the impartial observer. Not surprisingly, many who take on the extra load are students who already have more obligations than average. Consider Mona, who dropped the seminar. She told me,

I regret that I am going to have to drop my honors courses this semester.

Unfortunately, I just do not have the time required to fulfill my obligations to this course.... I hate to have to do this. Full time school and running my own business

full time, in addition to my family, has just begun to overwhelm me. I have to eliminate the non-essentials to keep my sanity!

It is hard to argue with her.

On the other hand, some students who apparently do very little make the same claim. Perhaps they are mislabeling their elevated stress levels or their poor priority-setting or time-management skills as having too much to do. Nonetheless, they experience their lives as overly busy. Because student priorities are often non-academic, it is easy to criticize their choices as non-productive or frivolous. Taking this position is not especially respectful or useful, and sounds like blaming the victim. Students do not accomplish more because they set low goals: they set low goals because they have misplaced priorities; they have misplaced priorities because of their personal experiences. Often, they are our students for all of these same reasons.

The View from the Inside

Certainly the students who are currently in the program have voices, as well, and their observations continue to shape the meaning of their program. Peggi, our artist in residence, has designed a logo for the group—an eagle in flight wearing a backpack, just about to land on the surface of the moon. The only place identified on the far-away earth is Sweet Home Alabama Southern. Her vision of what it means to be an honors student is a beautiful visual representation of the verbal responses of her classmates. The metaphor of soaring above the average recurred frequently in an on-line discussion of the meaning of the honors program. Listen to Angel, a student who would not qualify for most honors programs:

To me, it means reaching inside to find the best of what I can be as a student. To me, as the common little statement goes, I feel like I'm shooting for the moon and if I miss, I'll be fine because I'll land upon the stars. Corny, I know, but that's really how I feel. A dear friend of mine who passed away last May taught me something that I will always hold on to and cherish; Education is power. I feel that Honors is a highly educational experience and I know that she would be so proud of me for taking a step towards meeting even higher educational boundaries.

What power this young woman has found.

Lindy, whose record is above average but not outstanding, noted that for her, Being an Honors Student means you can excel way beyond your reach with the involvement of community activities and projects in course studies. To be an Honors Student is an overwhelming feeling of achievement that I have and knowing I can reach the highest limit possible and that's what being an HONORS STUDENT means to me. 'The Sky Is The Limit.'

William, who is in the program because of a new requirement that all academic scholarship recipients must participate, posted

To be above and beyond. To be an Honor's student requires extra effort in your academic and personal life. You have to dedicate more time to your studies, and be willing to give more of yourself in whatever is asked of you. I believe that is what it means to be an honors student.

Incidentally, William is currently organizing a golf tournament to raise money for the overseas summer travel opportunity. He is not going on the trip, but is enthusiastically supporting his peers.

In addition to these direct references, other responses are flush with high-flying metaphors. I noted the terms *above the average*, *exceeds far beyond the required*, *excel beyond the expectations*, *standing out*, *setting higher standards*, *overcoming*, and *pushing to the limit*.

These phrases appear in statements addressing two important aspects of the program. Some students spoke to the open, egalitarian admission policy. For example, Aishia is only planning to be at Alabama Southern one year, as her husband is in the military and will likely be stationed overseas in the fall. She told me,

This means the world to me. Since I have been in college I have wanted to join an honors program. Since I have never taken the ACT and my SAT scores are extremely low, I was afraid to join at my last school. So I jumped on the opportunity when I was told that everyone was welcomed. I am here to take part in new experiences and get an 'H' on my transcript. The program is awesome and I could not be happier.

Joni rises at 3:30 a.m. each day to deliver newspapers, a job she has held since she was 16. Now a 19-year-old, newly married mother of a newborn daughter, she responded,

I guess I might have a slightly different perspective. When I was in high school I was the best of the best in everything until my junior/senior year. When I started

getting sick, the medication prescribed kept me from having any motivation. It also affected my ability to think as sharply as I once had. For me, graduating with honors is a personal goal, to be the best of the best again.

What a joy to be able to help her regain her identity as an honor student. I cannot improve upon the testimonies of these students regarding the admission policy.

A more frequent category of response suggests personal motivation and agency, highlighting the empowerment offered by the program. For example,

Being an Honor's student is about being more than just average. It means that as students, we believe that there is more to more than just the surface and that we want to find out just that. On my personal experience as an Honor's student, I see new opportunities to excel in my classes and go beyond what is required of me. I love being an HONORS STUDENT!!!!

Another student comments,

To be an honor student to me means that I am asking myself to strive to be more than just another student. I am asking myself to push my academic skills to the limit. I require greatness and the thirst for knowledge from myself. That is what I think it means to be an honor student.

Calli said,

For me, being an honor student is just what the title says, an honor. I decided to join the honors program to make myself try harder in my classes and not just want

to get by. To be able to have the chance to be in such a great program is wonderful!

I could not agree more.

Intersections

I did not realize how important my journaling would be in this study. For one thing, when I found myself wanting to justify and clarify rather than listen, the knowledge that I would be journaling helped me keep my comments in check as I interacted with research participants. It would have been easy to contaminate the data so I was glad to have a constant reminder of my participant-observer status. In addition, the themes in my entries and among the thoughts and comments of the students echoed and overlapped, forming intriguing patterns.

My journal entries reveal three major categories: celebrations, inspirations, and frustrations. Celebration entries include notations about students and their successes, observations about events and class activities that worked well, and complimentary comments they have shared. Items I classify as inspirations are ideas for future seminars and trips, quotations I can share, collaborations with other instructors that seem likely, community service opportunities, and plans for program development. Frustrations, in general, center on bureaucratic or organizational issues and incidents that make my sailing less than smooth. All three types of entries are relevant to this study.

Even though I wrote these entries, I was surprised when I examined their contents. The distribution of content does not reflect my sense of the program. I did not record every pertinent item, and I did not journal every day. If I had, there would have

been more celebration entries in my journal, for they express much of the meaning of this program for me. Even without extensive notations, my mind immediately fills with these thoughts whenever I contemplate the honors program. At the beginning of this academic year, I was a little concerned about the number of students I might have in the honors program. Enrollment in 2006 had exceeded my expectations, but that successful campaign had taken a great deal of time and effort. The promotional materials mailed out the previous summer had been overlooked this year, and I anticipated having to spend a great deal of time hard selling to enroll students in the seminar.

My journal includes an entry noting my pleasure as I reviewed my roll for IDS 115, Fall 2007, and found 45 names. Soon after the semester began, Tyson asked me to write a recommendation letter for his application for a national scholarship competition. I recorded several conversations with Markita, who contacts me from time to time to update me on her life and accomplishments. In the past few weeks, she entered America's Top Model competition, applied to become a Big Sisters volunteer, and qualified for the psychology honors program at The University of Alabama. Her interview is in two weeks. The first focus group was an experience I cherish. It was filled with positive energy and comments and emotion. Each of this year's seminar meetings has received a brief jot, and each one is coded as a celebration entry.

I knew from last year that the first meeting needed to center on setting expectations and building community. I wanted to establish my role as consultant, encourager, mentor, and general go-to person for answers about the program. I had enough experience now to know that students would often be thwarted by bureaucracy,

and discouragement could easily outweigh their enthusiasm. I had nearly drowned in it myself at times, but I have established a track record as a decent swimmer by now. I told them my main goal is to enable them to succeed, and I would go to the limit for them as long as they were willing to work as hard as I did. The interaction that day was lively and excited, and I left feeling energized.

Because of a “college fair” on the Thomasville campus, I held the October session there so my students could take advantage of that opportunity. The rest of the session was a special treat for me. My daughter and new son-in-law presented a workshop on applying and interviewing for scholarships, with a special focus on prestigious awards such as Rhodes and Fulbright Scholarships. Many of my students have never considered trying to become competitive for national awards, and the objective of this session was to broaden their horizons. Students responded well to the mock interviews and the essay writing practice. My notations on this session, however, were primarily about preparing for it. I am a rank amateur at event planning; it is not my forte, and I am hesitant to attempt it. What a relief, then, when I asked a colleague how to get lunches ordered, delivered, and paid for, and she said, “I’ll do that for you!” She did, too. My journal reads, “They don’t call her Queen Joanne for nothing! She held my hand through this, and it just went great. I wish there were more just like her.” Unfortunately, Joanne is a rare treasure, and I do not have much contact with her under normal circumstances.

A visit from the new Chancellor of the post-secondary system preempted the November session. I coded the journaling for this session more than one way, for the logistics and some other aspects of it were frustrations, and I will get to that before long.

On the celebration side, however, the three students who explained our program to the Chancellor did a beautiful job, and they expressed pleasure at having the opportunity to meet him and to speak in that setting.

A Humanities panel highlighted the December session. The theme was “Why visit England?” Each instructor chose a topic that would in some way prepare students for the summer travel experience. While only a few are planning to go, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, and I want the group to get maximum benefit. The instructors agreed to participate. Once again, though, this meeting got mixed reviews in my journal. Despite my disappointment in the presentations of some of my colleagues, the students generally enjoyed the meeting and gave most of the speakers high marks.

The Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center in Mobile is a favorite destination for my students. Its exhibits are for general audiences, and it hosts some remarkable traveling exhibits. After an only moderately successful co-sponsored experience there last year, I organized the trip independently this time. The exhibit was “The Human Body: The Universe Within,” featuring plastinated human bodies and internal organs. This is not a special interest of mine, but our biology instructor had taken a group to see the exhibit in Atlanta and had raved about it. She heard that I was planning to take my students and asked if she could tag on with some of her classes, too. Another conversation with a nursing instructor ended up in basically that same place. We have many overlapping students, after all, and both of these instructors are going on the international honors trip this summer. So, the three of us coordinated a trip. We ended up taking 60 students to

Mobile. Although the planning and coordination were not all roses, this was a terrific experience that renewed my confidence in teamwork.

The most recent seminar meetings have been my most ambitious projects yet. In 2006, a long-time colleague was elected Circuit Judge. I had the opportunity to attend her swearing in ceremony at which the new Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court administered the oath of office. Justice Cobb is also an acquaintance, for when she presided over the juvenile court as District Judge in Conecuh County, I had many occasions to meet with her professionally. So, as I shook her hand at the reception, I asked Justice Cobb if she would consider speaking to my students. She asked me to give her six months to adjust to her new job, and after that she would be glad to come meet with them. When I contacted her office, her assistant mentioned that the court sometimes holds sessions in remote locations. With that, we began to plan to bring the Alabama Supreme Court to Monroeville. Once the wheels began to turn, the scale of this event outgrew my expectations.

Of course, the program entails much more than the seminar meetings. As a result of the workshop on scholarship applications and writing personal mission statements, students reached a general consensus that they wanted to sponsor a community service project. Among the suggestions was a talent show to benefit St. Jude's Research Hospital. I told them I would seek administrative approval and let them know, but that I would be unable to contribute much toward organizing the event. They assured me they would do the work if I could get approval. It went exactly that way. Although I had told them I would not, could not commit any time to the project, they persisted in involving me. I did

as little consulting as I could while supporting their success. A few items fell through the cracks, such as the newspaper and radio announcements that were supposed to happen but did not, which resulted in a very small audience. However, the show was held as scheduled, and the students raised just over \$250 for St. Jude's.

Like celebrations, inspirations happen often. Since they happen so often and so naturally, many of them never made it into the journal. Perhaps they do not come every day, but certainly multiple times per week. They strike during conversations with peers, they sneak into leisure activities, and they insert themselves into meetings with my mentor. Most frequently, though, they arise during interactions with students, honors or not, who share their concerns and their interests with me. I did not faithfully record these brainstorming sessions, but they have surely shaped my experience of the honors program. Not only that, but the program also has been shaped by them.

Students' suggestions often mirror my own observations and ideas so closely that changes have already happened before the comments are made. Some of the ideas they shared, though, were nothing I would ever have generated. I would not have thought to start a newsletter, for example, or to invite alumni to join us for seminars. I would not have thought of asking for a bulletin board to promote the program and publicize events. This inspiration has yet to materialize, but the potential for recognizing accomplishments, building interest, and informing students is clear. An art student might be able to "adopt" the bulletin board as part of an honors project.

So, when it is all boiled down, my journal is filled with entries coded "F" for frustration. Although I do not think of the program in these terms, notations in my journal

primarily record challenges, irritations, and outright failures. Frustrations take up far more than their share of ink in my journal. I coded them into four types: philosophical differences, bureaucratic hindrances, pettiness, and communication failures.

Much of the material coded as *frustration* records incidents or conversations that, to me, indicate a lack of vision on the part of someone who should know better. Consider a situation that arose at the end of Fall 2007 semester. Bridget wrote a contract in one of her classes and fulfilled it satisfactorily. However, at the end of the semester it was clear that she would not make the B required for honors credit to be awarded. I suggested that if her grade was close to 80%, her instructor might consider the project as a supplement to the course grade. Of course, if the B was awarded it would be without honors credit. As it happened, her average was a very high C. The instructor, however, was not at all willing to allow her excellent work to benefit her grade.

Another student complained that that same instructor had reviewed her progress a few weeks before the semester ended and told her she was on track with her project. She completed it and turned it in on time, and he gave it back to her, saying it was unsatisfactory. She was caught off guard but asked what she needed to do to receive her honors credit. The instructor told her she basically needed to start over and would still need to turn her completed work in by the original deadline which, by this time, was only days away. A first semester freshman, Jessica had never faced comprehensive final exams that counted so heavily in her grades before, and she was nervous about them. She believed that she could not redo the work while studying for finals, so she decided not to try. However, she was disappointed, frustrated, and angry when she spoke with me about

this. I told her the final decision was his, but that she should be as forthright about her situation with him as she was with me. I encouraged her to talk to the teacher.

Incidentally, when this instructor documented the contracts attempted that semester, this student's name was not even included. None of the four students he listed as having attempted honors projects received honors credit.

This teacher is an outstanding, outspoken specimen. While it is tempting to describe his stance as passive-aggressive, it is really closer to antagonistic. He has told me that our students are not smart enough to be at a university. I am acutely aware that he thinks an honors program at Alabama Southern is ridiculous. I am as acutely aware that he is not alone. It seems, perhaps, that even the governing body of post-secondary education aligns with him philosophically.

Thus, many entries relate to the Chancellor's visit to our campus, and another flurry refers to correspondence with his office. I mentioned his meeting with my students earlier in the context of the honors seminar. The meeting itself, you may recall, was coded as a celebration. Other aspects of this event were not. For example, the Chancellor announced that he would be on campus on a Tuesday. The date was not negotiable. The seminar meets on Fridays to minimize conflicts with other classes. I was told that this was a mandatory meeting, and all of the students were expected to attend, and the session would begin promptly at 9:00 a.m.

All instructors were informed of the meeting and its importance. I soon received this email: "I have chemistry class from 8:00- 9:15 but we have a test so i can't tell what time i will get out. If it is okay when I am finished with my test I will be at the meeting.

Thanks for understanding.” It was, of course, unacceptable for students to plan to be late. I replied, “You must be there BY 9:00. Period. Do not be late. It would be very rude and most unacceptable. Perhaps you can take the test early?” I exchanged similar correspondence with another student in a biology class.

It was obvious that I needed to approach these instructors on behalf of these students. The biology teacher, who has mentored several successful honors projects including last year’s outstanding project award winner, gave her honors students the option of starting their tests early in order to be at the session by 9:00. The chemistry teacher, who has had few students ask to do contracts with him and who has not authorized credit for a single one, asked what I thought he should do. I told him how his colleague had resolved the situation. He immediately announced that he would postpone his test, and the affected students could simply consider themselves excused that day. Remember, the conflict was only the last 15 minutes of his class period. I assured him that was overkill, but he said he could not think of anything he would rather do than support the program. This theme will recur, but first, back to the Chancellor.

The Chancellor was ostensibly touring all community colleges in the state to learn about the programs and approaches unique to each. Once he was on site, though, it seemed that he was there more to inform than to understand. We would, he told us in no uncertain terms, soon understand that all operations would be under his direct control and that anyone who did not want to do things his way would be better off leaving the community college system. Soon after his visit, we received notification from his office that Dr. Johnson’s request to partially reimburse students for expenses associated with the

summer trip to the British Isles was denied and that students who traveled must do so at their own expense. This was a major blow to the program. A graduate of Duke University, Chancellor Byrne either is not particularly attuned to the realities of most of our students or does not believe that students with financial need deserve or benefit from experiences that cost more than they can afford.

The preceding incidents seem primarily to stem from underlying differences in philosophy. The next series has to do with what to me amounts to a focus on territory and habit. I coded this category of frustrations *pettiness*. It is a near relative of the next category, a concern with minutiae that borders on bureaucratic ritualism. An outstanding example of this category concerns the instructor who postponed the test for the Chancellor's visit. The January seminar was scheduled for 9:00 on Friday the 25th. The aforementioned instructor had complained to some students that the meeting conflicted with his lab, a situation that has been discussed and presumably resolved before. When I heard he was voicing dissatisfaction, however, I spoke with him about it and reminded him that this would be my first meeting with the students, and I would release them as soon as I could, but must really insist that they attend. He asked whether there was "something sacred" about 9:00, or would I consider changing the meeting time to 10:00 in the future. He said he had asked one of our administrators, and she said she had no objection, so this was apparently entirely my decision. I told him I would schedule at 10:00 whenever feasible, but that for some of the seminars scheduled this semester a time change would not be possible. I told him which meetings could not be later and why; he told me he would not remember what I had said, but he understood my position. On

Thursday, January 24, I received email from the administrator's assistant which read in part

There is [an] issue that I need to discuss with you regarding the Honors Forum class time. There has been a request to move the time to 10:00 a.m. to help students that have labs on Fridays have a better opportunity to attend and for students that need to travel. Can you also plan to discuss this with me so that we can weigh the pros/cons of this decision.

I told her I had already talked to my colleague about this, and summarized the discussion that had transpired. I asked that she refer such questions back to me. She called my attention to the rest of the email that she had sent me, which said

Based on issues that have come up this semester, there are several decisions that need to be reviewed and decided before we can approve the Honors faculty handbook. Dr. Taylor has asked that you contact Dr. Halli at UA and see if he has some suggestions regarding the issues that you are already aware of:

How do they handle students that complete the Honors assignment and do not receive the grade that grants honors credit? Does the Faculty member get paid?

How do they handle students that complete the assignment and has the grade to get credit, but does not get a passing grade on the assignment (especially if the student feels that the faculty did not fully communicate the expectations and did not have time to make corrections to meet the expectations)?

How should faculty be compensated (one contract price per student, per course, per 3 students, etc.)? NOTE: Our handbook says \$100 only- regardless of the number of students. However, we have paid \$100/ student in the past. This semester we have one instructor that has 9 students. Should there be a maximum number that would be a reasonable expectation? I think that there should be some limit (to give the faculty some backing if they want/need to say no.)

She continues,

After mentioning some of the issues that you and I have discussed, I believe that it is time to re-review the handbook and try to resolve the issues in light of some of the “problems” that have emerged. These are a few of the things that I would like to have your input on:

We need to look at the deadlines and determine if they are protecting the student and the faculty. The handbook states that the projects are due November 17. It sounds like this semester that some students were still working on this during exam week. This would also help the student if they want to make adjustments to the project if the faculty member determines that this did not meet expectations.

As I expected, she suggested remediation in the form of increased paperwork. The email goes on:

We need to create a mid-term progress report form that the faculty member needs to give to the student (and a copy to you) that would allow a check point between the faculty member and student, and a place to recommend the student to continue

or cease the project. (If the student is not making a B at this point, it should be noted that the student may not receive Honors credit).

We need to add a place on the contract for the faculty member to list the Course Number, Title and Section Number- we have to have this for auditing purposes to list on the contract.

Next is another set of requirements:

The timeline states that there is Team grading that occurs for the projects. What is the make-up of the “teams” that grade. We should outline this (i.e. A 3-member committee?) Maybe we should create a form that needs to be submitted to you along with the project that would also serve as documentation for the grade.

There could be a place for the committee to sign/approve, you to assign/approve, and the VP for Academic Affairs to sign/approve. Then you could attach the contract, mid-term review and final grade sheet to Academic Affairs. We could put this in the faculty file along with the Honors faculty contract. The compensation will be dispersed only if all of these forms are turned in. This documentation backs up the contract if we are audited.

And finally,

I would like to get the final version of this Handbook approved and submitted to the faculty as soon as possible. After you contact Dr. Halli and after you have some time to reflect on your thoughts on how to handle this, will you make time to meet with me to discuss.

I still feel my blood pressure rising each time I reread this missive. Many of the questions it raises have been discussed numerous times. For instance, the deadlines were initially included only as suggestions. I think faculty should have the autonomy to make such decisions in cooperation with their students when they write their contracts, so we got “deadlines” only when this administrator incorporated them as such in order to make a handbook. The idea that externally imposed and enforced deadlines would in some way contribute to “protecting the student and the faculty” is alien to me. The idea that “we need” to create forms and monitor compliance regarding mid-term progress reports and project deadlines, specify grading rubrics, and that, as stated above, “we need” to specify the makeup of a committee to grade projects, and “create a form that needs to be submitted” to document their deliberations is equally foreign.

As to my contacting Dr. Halli, I simply refuse. I discussed all these matters with him prior to setting up the program, which I modeled in some ways after his. He pays a flat \$100.00 to any professor who offers honors-by-contract in a course, whether one or several students participate, and the requirements for payment are clearly noted in the agreement they sign and that he shared with me. I quote it verbatim in my program proposal, and it has never once been followed as written. That was not my call, one way or another. My role has been to notify the registrar and the Vice President’s administrative assistant when students complete projects and whether the projects are satisfactory or not. The practice has been to compensate faculty \$100.00 for each honors project completed, as long as the student is enrolled in IDS115 and has an approved contract on file in my office.

Even this, as simple as it sounds, became a source of frustration in Fall 2007. A new staff member was assigned to the task of paying the mentors. I turned in the paperwork as I had each of the two previous semesters. She did not pay the instructors. Well into January, an instructor inquired about payment. I referred her to the appropriate person, who referred her back to me. I called the administrative assistant myself, and she said she did not have all the information she needed so she could prepare contracts and get the instructors paid. I asked what else she needed; she said she would have to get back with me about that. Once I was satisfied she had everything she needed, she sent out an email to the instructors asking for additional information. She did not copy me on this email. I learned of it when someone asked me whether I had not kept any records or if I had just not given them to the business office. This incident is representative of the *communication failures* category. I wish it were an aberration, but it is not the only entry of its kind. This kind of inefficiency, which causes extra work and confusion each time it happens, is fairly easy to avoid.

Much of my frustration has to do with my anticipation that things will work just as I envision them. I have been told that my expectations for myself as well as for others are high, sometimes unrealistically so. It is possible to interpret the interactions that irritated me in other ways. Chancellor Byrne, for example, is a state-level politician whose reasoning resonates with many of his political party. The administrator I mentioned is inventing her position as she goes, and she sincerely considers policy handbooks and forms and non-negotiable deadlines desirable. Other instructors are comfortable in their niches, and had no voice, and therefore no investment, in the

development of the honors program. The administrative assistant has never administered a program or supervised a program, and thus has no experience with being blind-sided because of a breakdown in a communication loop. Thank goodness, though, that the celebrations and inspirations far exceed my frustrations—and far exceed what bureaucrats and politicians can imagine.

CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION

As a participant observer of the honors program, I am moving alongside my students. Together we have explored things that, alone, we probably never would have. I listened as students told me ways in which they have grown while they have been in the program. John never considered law as a career, and so he was not interested in attending the session of the Supreme Court that we hosted. He did attend, though, and now he says he has a better understanding of how the court system works. I can share similar tales. For example, because of my association with this program, I have traveled to DC, New York, and Paris, and am anticipating a trip to the British Isles; I have attended a cocktail party with the Justices of the Alabama Supreme Court; I have exchanged emails and gifts with a Harvard physicist; I have dug for artifacts and explored the psychology of evil. I have met astronauts, archaeologists, engineers, and even the venerable Dr. Albert Bandura. I have learned to plan events for large groups.

Through these experiences, I have definitely changed. Although I was somewhat hesitant at first, now I love to introduce myself as the Honors Program Director. Using that title shapes my experience, opening doors I did not know to knock upon. I think about the world differently. Even in my personal life, I find myself filtering encounters through an honors-program-colored lens, considering how I can capitalize for the benefit of my students. I am willing to ask for favors and extras for these students that I would not ask for myself. In my new identity, this is my responsibility and my privilege.

The meaning of this program is continually being formed from within and without. The political climate, college personnel, funding challenges, community perception, and other logistical concerns pull, while individual interests, personalities, goals, and needs provide the push. With all of this in mind, it has been a revelation to notice the parallel currents in the stream of experiences. It is so much more comfortable to consider plan seminars for my own convenience, or aligned with my own interests. It is illuminating as well as comforting to find that, in general, what works for me pleases them, and things that I find irksome annoy them, too. I can help students navigate without any great effort. I can imagine myself in their shoes if I try, for theirs are right there next to mine, after all.

By exploring the honors program through the voices of students, I am increasingly attuned to the ways that the act of telling shapes the story. As words are selected and said aloud, meanings crystallize. In this study, it sometimes appeared that students carefully considered reasons for their decisions about participation for the first time when I interviewed them. Their descriptions of their most frustrating and most fulfilling experience apparently similarly solidified their opinions. Even those who initially hesitated to respond grew confident about their answers once they were verbalized.

As my theoretical framework in symbolic interactionism suggests, individuals' meanings of shared experiences overlap and intersect when they are from the same culture, speaking the same language, and thus invoking the same symbols. Without this continuity, communication and mutual understanding would not be possible. As we communicate our experiences, shared meanings are socially constructed. However,

meanings are also unique. Therefore, the meaning of this honors program varies from one student to another. For some, the program is an extension of the identity they began to develop before arriving at Alabama Southern. It seems natural to them that they be recognized as honors students. Others are newly emerging. Within the group, and especially among the novices, some individuals are more solidly identified as honors students than others. I understand; as I have already described, it took me a little while to develop my identity as the honors program director. Knowing this, I can intentionally give students opportunities to hear themselves described in ways that reinforce their evolving self-images. They may find, as I have, that the label matters not only to them, but also to others, in unexpectedly positive ways.

Many theorists hold that identity is performative (Butler, 1990). In *Nickel and dimed: On (not) getting by in America*, Ehrenreich (2001) says that people knew her as a waitress, a maid, a cashier and so on because she did what those people do. By the same token, I have become an honors program director by directing an honors program. One becomes an honors student by doing things that honors students do. Peggi exemplifies this principle. Not a particularly high achiever, she enrolled in the program for the first time this semester. She will graduate in May. She has become an honors student through and through. She speaks excitedly about her wonderful honors project, one that I agree is truly exceptional. Hers is a biology project involving direct observation and research, but which culminated in her creation of a large (4' x 8') three-dimensional multimedia art piece capturing her vision of the ecosystem of a beaver pond on her property. She told me that the project had essentially consumed her. She said she thinks about it every day, and has worked "hundreds of hours" on it. She said, "This has opened up something for me,

and I really didn't expect that." Angie has changed her career goal as a result of this project. She would like to combine an art and biology major in order to illustrate science books. She also intends to compete for an academic scholarship with this project as the focal point in her application portfolio.

In addition to exploring this program in terms of symbolic interactionism and the creation of meaning, my other theoretical perspective was social learning theory. Specifically, I was interested in examining Bandura's (1977) formulation of self-efficacy in relation to the honors program. Though I had not adopted a grounded theory methodology, as the study progressed I began thinking of self-efficacy in richer ways. Schwandt (2001) says that in grounded theory methodology, "experience with data generates insights, hypotheses, and generative questions that are pursued through further data generation. As tentative answers to questions are developed and concepts are constructed, these constructions are verified through further data collection" (p. 110). As I considered the data, I found that other theoretical concepts speak to many of the same issues and deserve consideration alongside Bandura's.

Recall that self-efficacy is the mental construct that success at performing some specific action is possible and that self-efficacy along with awareness of an opportunity and belief in its value are the three vital ingredients that launch a particular behavior. While the data can be explained using social psychology terms from social psychology literature, I am unable to ignore the concepts of *voice* and *agency* in examining these data. According to Schwandt, voice has to do with "who 'speaks' ... The concern with the connection between who speaks, who is heard, and what is voiced or given a voice is central to much feminist scholarship" (2001, p. 278). This study centers on hearing

participants' voices, and certainly I found some participants harder to hear. Perhaps the difficulty is because one or more of Bandura's components was missing for them because of structural barriers. Maybe it is because their voices have been silenced for too long. Possibly they did not fully realize an opportunity existed. Conceivably, the interviews or surveys lacked value to them. In any case, muted voice is of concern. As for agency, it is best understood in relation to social structure. In Schwandt's words

Broadly understood, the term *human agency* signals the capacity of individuals to perceive their situation, reason about it, consciously monitor their action, form motives, and so on. The agency versus structure problem is the sociological version of the philosophical problem of free will versus determinism. (p. 4)

In other words, why do some people behave in ways that sociological or psychological models do not predict? The answer may lie in some aspect of human agency. It seems that agency and efficacy may address the same issues.

Many conversations I had with Alabama Southern students align with Bandura's observation that a decision to act includes evaluation that the behavior is worth the effort, that the actor expects to be successful, and that the opportunity exists for the actor to engage in the action. Remember the student who said she participated because her instructors encouraged her. She says, "They made me feel as if I am capable of doing well and that it would be beneficial for my future." Another student, J. B., came to sit with me while riding the bus back from a trip to Huntsville. He provided another journal entry coded as a *celebration* as well as a great example of the role of self-efficacy in decision making. As we talked about the trip, he shared these thoughts:

I am really glad I am in this program. I didn't sign up right away, you know. In high school, I made a lot of B's and C's and an A once in a while. I made A's in history. I could have done more, but I didn't. I work at a drugstore. I want to be a pharmacist, and everyone, especially my grandma, told me I can't do it without making better grades. I took a class, it was in English, at Alabama Southern the summer after I graduated and made a B. I really liked that. It felt good. When classes started in the fall, my computer teacher mentioned the honors program to me, and I thought, "nah, that's not for me," but then I read something about it that said honors students tend to do better in all their classes. Me and Josh both decided to try it, and we both signed up. That semester, I made all A's and B's! I like the variety of things we do. I think I am doing better in my classes because I know there are a lot of other people who really care about their grades. I was invited to join Phi Theta Kappa! Now my grandma believes I may really be able to be a pharmacist after all.

He found out that he was eligible for the program. His good grade increased his confidence that he could succeed in the program. He believed that there were advantages to being in the honors program. That is as close to Bandura's (1997) prototype as I can imagine.

Notice that both responses embody Bandura's ideas. It is not enough to make the program accessible, nor is it sufficient to have fun, exciting programs or cultural or academic opportunities. Many students need encouragement about their ability to succeed in honors classes. With this in mind, I may be able to make the program more

welcoming to students who will derive the most benefit from its egalitarian format and agenda.

The reasons given by students who did not enroll or who withdrew mid-semester can be categorized into Bandura's categories as well. Some did not consider the program sufficiently beneficial. As the meaning of the program develops, this perception is likely to change. The extrinsic appeal of graduation regalia and resume' entries attract a certain group of students; however, the intrinsic appeal of activities and opportunities of the seminar and related endeavors are likely to become a stronger draw as former students share their enthusiasm with peers.

Also, for various reasons, some lacked the confidence that they would be successful. Their reluctance often had to do with time constraints because of outside demands such as jobs and families. Clear understanding of the "no-risk" feature tends to combat this. Some did not understand that the program was intended for them, either because of their age, the campus with which they are primarily associated, or their prior academic record. A personal discussion and invitation is a powerful antidote for this. Often, having someone ask them directly to consider the program makes the difference in their decision to enroll. The kudzu communication problem will need some serious attention in order to address these challenges.

When the study began, I wanted to gain an understanding of what it means to be an honor student at Alabama Southern Community College. With this in mind, if I were just now commencing on this research, I would include current students in a focus group. My concern was that there would be a potential perception of coercion to participate, and I took great care to avoid that possibility. In retrospect, I may have been too cautious.

Additionally, I would try to create a consent form that better fit the situation. The one I used was based on another researcher's format that had recently received IRB approval. While it met the requirements for informed consent, it did not meet my needs well. I am obviously reluctant to follow the lead of other honors program directors, and I should have blazed my own trail in this area, too. It might not have brought students to that second focus group meeting, but it might have.

It would be instructive, too, to generate data about the perceptions of college faculty and staff. Future researchers might find it fruitful to examine meaning of the program from those perspectives. Students reported that certain staff and faculty were less than supportive of their participation in the program. Low expectations have been identified as barriers to the success of community college students. Examining staff and faculty attitudes could verify or challenge common assumptions about the level of support that exists, and, if necessary, provide a launch pad for institutional climate change. I also wanted to discover what students believe about the value of the honors program that influenced their decisions about whether to participate. I could have included an additional question such as "What would an honors program need to look like, or what would it need to offer, in order for you to choose to participate in it?"

I find immense joy and satisfaction in the work that I do. I delight in teaching psychology and sociology, and I find special pleasure in directing the honors program at Alabama Southern Community College. I revel in the wondrous variety among the students, the tremendous range of ideas I have the opportunity to consider, and the many new experiences I get to share. In my various roles at the college, I fulfill my desire to touch lives in ways I believe have meaning and value. A primary purpose of this research

was to explore ways in which I can build an honors program that is meaningful and valuable not just in theory, and not just to me, but in the lived experiences of its students.

Perhaps the most important outcome of this research for me has been a change in my mission. Student stories have helped me reinterpret what I am here to accomplish. As I understand it now, my mission is to throw open the door of higher education to students who enter the doors of Alabama Southern tentatively, even apologetically. Before this study began, I knew little of the literature regarding student engagement. I did not know much about the relationship between student perceptions of their early experiences with college advisors and retention. I did not have a clear vision of my role in student success. While I cannot claim that I fully understand the potential the honors program has to positively impact the success trajectories of Alabama Southern Community College students, I am more aware of a unique niche that this program fills. I am better able to visualize the program's place in providing at least some of the scaffolding students need as they navigate unfamiliar territory in higher education.

In considering the function of higher education, thinkers as far back as Plato have held that one important role is to train the next generation's citizens to take their places in society. While it seems certain that few academicians would explicitly champion a call to unthinkingly replicate society's inequities, the unintended consequence of business-as-usual models for higher education honors programs is continued cultural reproduction. Mindful change in program development is required if meaningful change is to result.

The philosophical foundations of American education are replete with reminders that regurgitation of rote-memorized facts does not constitute learning and that education is more than systematized familiarity with some extant body of literature or technology.

For example, John Dewey's writings emphasize the need for education to broaden the intellect and develop problem solving and critical thinking skills rather than simply imparting of dead, dry facts. As a pragmatist, Dewey was ever mindful that outcomes are important and did not shy away from high expectations for students. However, he criticizes overemphasis on outcomes at the expense of the process. He stresses practical application and experiential learning and reminds teachers to use the knowledge students bring with them as a springboard for further teaching.

Dewey did not envision education as a means to preserve the *status quo*. Rather, he envisioned the public school as an incubator for democracy and as such responsible for fully integrating skills and knowledge into the lives of the students (Dewey, 1910). Jane Addams, founder of Hull House and Nobel Prize winner, shared Dewey's vision. Like the immigrants with whom Addams worked, rural community college students are often burdened with any number of structural and individual obstacles. Even the most capable and advantaged encounter barriers such as limited educational resources and cultural opportunities. As Ivy and Alis described, many have additional personal complications. No category of student is problem free, of course, but students in this setting commonly face a variety of challenges all at once. Addams's passion fueled the fires of achievement among immigrants and their families. She did not perceive the barriers they faced as defining their potential or the worth of her work with them, so she creatively opened doors for them that others thought were futile. Perhaps the egalitarian honors program model can similarly encourage and empower rural community college students.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter



Research and Sponsored Programs
 Building 11, Room 109
 11000 University Parkway
 Pensacola, FL 32514-5750

Ms. Barbara F. McMillan
 496 Westbrook Dr.
 Monroeville, AL 36460

November 7, 2007

Dear Ms. McMillan:

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Research Participant Protection has completed its review of your proposal titled "An Egalitarian Honors Program: The Lived Experiences of Rural Community College Students" as it relates to the protection of human participants used in research, and has granted approval for you to proceed with your study. As a research investigator, please be aware of the following:

- You acknowledge and accept your responsibility for protecting the rights and welfare of human research participants and for complying with all parts of 45 CFR Part 46, the UWF IRB Policy and Procedures, and the decisions of the IRB. You may view these documents on the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs web page at <http://www.research.uwf.edu>. You acknowledge completion of the IRB ethical training requirements for researchers as attested in the IRB application.
- You will ensure that legally effective informed consent is obtained and documented. If written consent is required, the consent form must be signed by the participant or the participant's legally authorized representative. A copy is to be given to the person signing the form and a copy kept for your file.
- You will promptly report any proposed changes in previously approved human participant research activities to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. The proposed changes will not be initiated without IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the participants.
- **You are responsible for reporting progress of approved research to the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the end of the project period. Approval for this project is valid for one year. If the data phase of your project continues beyond one year, you must request a renewal by the IRB before approval of the first year lapses. Project Directors of research requiring full committee review should notify the IRB when data collection is completed.**
- You will immediately report to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to human participants.

Good luck in your research endeavors. If you have any questions or need assistance, please contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 857-6378.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terry Prewitt".

Dr. Terry Prewitt, Chair
 IRB for Human Research
 Participant Protection

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Richard S. Podemski".

Dr. Richard S. Podemski
 Associate Vice President for Research and
 Dean of Graduate Studies

Phone 850.474.2824 Fax 850.474.2082

Web research.uwf.edu

An Equal Opportunity/Equal Access Institution

Appendix B
Informed Consent Form

**Informed Consent Form for Research Conducted by Barbara F. McMillan,
Doctoral Student at the University of West Florida**

Title of Research: An egalitarian honors program: The lived experiences of rural community college students

- I.** Federal and university regulations require researchers to obtain signed consent for participation in research involving human participants. After reading the statements in section II through V below, please indicate your consent by signing and dating this form.
- II. Statement of Procedure:** Thank you for your interest in this research project being conducted by Barbara F. McMillan, an instructor at Alabama Southern Community College and a doctoral student at the University of West Florida. The purpose of this study is to generate an understanding of the lived experiences of high achieving and honors program students sufficient to guide administrators and educators as they make decisions about the development of the honors program. Please carefully read the information below and if you wish to participate in this study, sign your name and write the date.
- I understand that:
- (1) All individuals voluntarily participate in this study that may use surveys, interviews, focus groups, and journaling as methods to generate data.
 - (2) The researcher assures all participants of confidentiality and will change the names and other personal identifying information that will be referenced in the study's results.
 - (3) The researcher will share the results of this study with administrators and instructors and other participants if requested.
 - (4) I may discontinue participation in this study at any time without penalty.
- III. Potential Risks of the Study:** There are no foreseeable risks to participants in this study.
- IV. Potential Benefits of the Study:**
- (1) The results of this study may provide an understanding of the ways in which students experience the honors program that will allow decision makers to develop the program to better meet students' needs.
 - (2) The results of this study may provide an understanding of the ways in which students experience the honors program that will allow the instructor to provide more a meaningful curriculum.
 - (3) The results of this study may lead to a better understanding of student self-efficacy in connection with students' decisions about program participation.

- (3) Participants in this study may be more aware of the meaning that the honors program has for them, encouraging them to seek opportunities that help them meet their academic aspirations.

V. Statement of Consent: I certify that I have read and fully understand the Statement of Procedure given above and agree to participate in the research described therein. Permission is given voluntarily and without coercion or undue influence. It is understood that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which I may otherwise be entitled. I will be provided a copy of this consent form.

If you have questions, please contact Barbara McMillan.
 E-mail: bcmillan@ascc.edu
 Phone: (251) 575-8420
 Office: 107 Science Building
 Alabama Southern Community College

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Participant's Name (Please Print)

 Participants E-mail Address (Please Print)

Participant's Address (Please Print)
