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Stratification with Honors: A Case Study of the "High" Track within United States Higher Education

Amy E. Stich

Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA; astich@uga.edu; Tel.: +1-706-543-0048

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Abstract: At present, U.S. postsecondary sorting is best evidenced by an increasingly stratified system of higher education. However, very little attention is paid to even deeper levels of stratification within colleges and universities where academic tracking and its consequences are manifest. Given this significant lack of attention to deepening levels of stratification within many of the most "accessible" postsecondary institutions in the U.S., the purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to introduce readers to the notion of academic tracking within the postsecondary sector, (2) to situate honors education within the U.S. postsecondary tracking structure, and (3) to demonstrate the depths of stratification within a system that is lauded as the contemporary architect of social mobility. Based upon qualitative data collected during the 2016–2017 academic year at one public 4-year "accessible" university, findings illustrate the persistence, structure, and depths of stratification as an unintended consequence of one university's efforts to reconcile the competing goals of excellence and equity.

Keywords: higher education; stratification; inequality; tracking; honors education

1. Introduction

Within the U.S., academic tracking profoundly affects students' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. Although a purported mechanism for sorting K-12 students by ability and prior academic performance, tracking acts instead to reinforce racial and class-based inequalities. To date, a significant amount of research shows that low-income and/or minority students are more likely to be assigned to lower tracks wherein resources, expectations, knowledge, and the ways in which knowledge is disseminated differ from higher tracks (Kelly and Carbonaro 2012; Oakes 1985; Oakes et al. 1992; Oakes and Saunders 2008; Rosenbaum 1976; Tyson 2011). These differences have long constituted separate and unequal pathways, dividing students by race and class, and challenging popular conceptions of meritocracy and democratic education; however, as Shields (2014, p. 114) asserts, what is perhaps less well known is that "the playing field in higher education mirrors that of K-12 education". This largely understudied trend suggests that the sorting function of education (tracking) has moved into the space of postsecondary education.

At present, U.S. postsecondary sorting is best evidenced by an increasingly stratified system of higher education. However, very little attention is paid to even deeper levels of stratification *within* colleges and universities where academic tracking and its consequences are manifest. Increased competition (Bowen et al. 2009), in particular, has prompted strategic moves within many of the nation's most accessible colleges and universities to attract talented, high-performing students (e.g., via honors education) and simultaneously meet the needs of a larger number of academically underprepared students (e.g., via developmental/remedial education). Although these organizational structures, such as honors and developmental education, are legitimated as educational "pathways" within many of the more "accessible" postsecondary institutions, they arguably function as a continuation of earlier

tracking structures, channeling students from particular social backgrounds into separate and unequal tracks, leading to unequal access to opportunities, experiences, and outcomes.

However, nearly all research on tracking remains limited to secondary education. Moreover, the little research published on tracking in higher education is limited to tracking *between* two-year and four-year institutions (Alba and Lavin 1981). This two-track conception of the postsecondary tracking structure neglects the dominant and pervasive contemporary dynamic of competition between colleges and universities sparked by the creation of explicit tracks *within* institutions. Given the significant lack of attention to deepening levels of stratification within many of the most "accessible" postsecondary institutions in the U.S., and given the concern for parallel inequalities within its K-12 system, this article examines the structure and social consequence of one distinct academic track (the honors or "high" track) within one non-selective, public, four-year university.

This article is based upon data from a larger two-year, embedded multi-case study. Findings illustrate the persistence, structure, and depths of stratification as an unintended consequence of one university's efforts to reconcile the competing goals of excellence and equity. Specifically, the article demonstrates the depths of stratification that reach beyond the unchallenged divisions between honors students and their non-honors peers and move into the more nuanced ways in which the Honors College itself has become stratified over time. The purpose of this article is threefold: (1) to introduce readers to the notion of academic tracking within the postsecondary sector, (2) to situate honors education within the U.S. postsecondary tracking structure, and (3) to demonstrate the depths of stratification within a system that is lauded as the contemporary architect of social-mobility.[1] As inequality deepens and global patterns across higher education reflect increasing stratification, "with further differentiated access to its upper reaches" (Marginson 2016a), stratification will not cease at the edge of institutions or at the boundaries of the academic tracks within them, but will continue to manifest and spread into the more microdimensions of our colleges and universities.

2. The Breadth and Depth of Stratification in Higher Education

This research is largely informed by sociological theories of stratification as directly applied to systems of higher education. According to stratification theorists, when higher education underwent a massive expansion, it also became increasingly stratified, as less selective institutions absorbed much of the growth in enrollment while elite institutions remained largely inaccessible to most (Davies and Guppy 2010; Davies and Zarifa 2012; Marginson 2016b). In fact, as Marginson (2016a) argues, "the institutional hierarchy is getting steeper". For example, increased competition for admission to the most selective institutions in the U.S. has sent more middle-class (middle-income) students to two-year and less-selective four-year institutions that historically have been spaces with larger concentrations of working-class and low-income students (Bowen et al. 2009). These middle-class students, "who in earlier years might have attended first- and second-tier private colleges and universities have been attracted by the academic quality, prestige (in the case of honors colleges), broad range of programs, and comparatively lower cost of their states' public universities" (p. 263). Shifting demographics at state flagship universities are telling wherein the percentage of Pell Grant recipients has fallen while the number of students in higher income brackets has risen in recent years (Bowen et al. 2009). As a result of these shifts in the postsecondary market, students from low-income and working-class backgrounds remain largely concentrated at the bottom tiers of the academic hierarchy, while those with the most advantage are relatively concentrated within the upper tiers (Carnevale and Strohl 2013; Hearn and Rosinger 2014; Shavit et al. 2007; Soares 2007). The consequences of social stratification at this systemic level are well-researched. For example, two-year and many for-profit U.S. institutions that target underserved student populations have among the lowest retention and completion rates,

[1] Marginson (2016b, p. 428) notes that "there is no study that conclusively establishes the role of higher education in mobility, though it is clear this varies by country".

leaving a large percentage of these students without degrees and further burdened with debt (Baum and Steele 2010). The rise of for-profit institutions in the U.S., in particular, is decidedly the most egregious example of postsecondary institutions that "rely upon persistent inequalities as a business model" (McMillan-Cottom 2017, p. X).

In addition to increased competition at all levels of higher education, scholars argue that the intensification of the hierarchical order within higher education can be attributed to a number of factors including a growing disinvestment in public higher education and the social positioning of families—all of which have contributed to limiting the conditions for equality of access and opportunity (Marginson 2016a, 2016b). To explain systems that deepen inequality while providing greater access, scholars often look to the ways in which inequalities are both "effectively" and "maximally" maintained (Boliver 2011). According to Raftery and Hout (1993), the hypothesis of maximally maintained inequality (MMI) suggests that with expansion and an increase in educational opportunity for everyone, opportunities will remain unequal because those who are more privileged are better positioned to take advantage of new opportunities. A reduction in inequality only occurs at the point at which the most socioeconomically advantaged reach the point of "saturation" within a particular stratum of education (Raftery and Hout 1993); however, because those who are socioeconomically advantaged are better positioned to seek out new opportunities, expansion is unlikely to lead to great equality of opportunity. However, Lucas (2001) argues that MMI does not account for qualitative differentiation within and between institutions that accompanies expansion. In light of this, Lucas (2001, p. 1652) writes:

> Effectively maintained inequality posits that socioeconomically advantaged actors secure for themselves and their children some degree of advantage wherever advantages are commonly possible. . . . It may be that as long as a particular level of schooling is not universal (e.g., high school completion throughout the first half of the 20th century in the United States), the socioeconomically advantaged use their advantages to secure that level of schooling. Once that level of schooling becomes nearly universal, however, the socioeconomically advantaged seek out whatever qualitative differences there are *at that level* and use their advantages to secure quantitatively similar but qualitatively better education.

In other words, effectively maintained inequality (EMI) suggests that even at the point of saturation or when a particular level of education becomes universal, the most socioeconomically advantaged students will still be better positioned to obtain qualitatively different opportunities. Despite the growth of qualitative distinctions between institutions of higher education, few studies have examined stratification *within* institutions of higher education. Some exceptions include research on field of study, which has been associated with occupation and greater or lesser earnings post-graduation (Goyette and Mullen 2006; Marginson 2016b) and research on the differentiated pathways available to students from differing backgrounds at one flagship[2] university in the U.S. (for example, the "party pathway") (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). This research aims to contribute to new conversations about the role of postsecondary tracking as a form of internal stratification and as part of well-worn conversations related to the ways in which seemingly well-intended efforts to bring about greater equality of opportunity can function instead to bring about even greater inequality. Although a more comprehensive overview of the postsecondary tracking structure and its consequences are beyond the scope of this article, this research provides a more focused lens that reveals the depths of stratification via the honors track (the "high" track) within one public university struggling to compete in the academic marketplace.

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[2] Within the U.S., "flagship" universities are typically leading public universities within their respective states with the highest research productivity (i.e., R1 status).

3. A "Higher" Education for Whom?: Honors Programs in U.S. Colleges and Universities

As defined by the NCHC (2018),[3] honors education "ignites passion for lifelong learning and encourages student creativity, collaboration, and leadership in the classroom and beyond. It is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education" (para. 1).[4] Though first introduced as a form of curricular enhancement within American universities nearly a century ago, the first honors college in a four-year public university was not established until 1960, and more than 60% of existing honors programs were not established until 1994 (Singuel and Tang 2012). As states and their public universities struggled to keep the highest-achieving students from leaving for more prestigious institutions, honors programs continued to expand as a way to "attract, organize appropriate opportunities for, and graduate talented students who can then compete effectively with those who have gone to that small number of institutions we traditionally identify with the highest-quality undergraduate education" (Humphrey 2008, p. 12). Indeed, as Long (2002, p. 718) similarly reports, "the proliferation of honors programs stems in large part from state-level, supply-side incentives of public institutions to compete for high-achieving students by offering a unique, high-quality experience at a lower cost relative to their selective and liberal arts alternatives". The proliferation of honors education is statistically clear. In some form, honors education is now part of "1503 of the 2500 nonprofit undergraduate institutions" (Scott et al. 2017, p. 190) and is spread across public two- and four-year institutions, as well as private colleges and universities. However, Kaczvinsky (2007, p. 88) asserts, "Most honors programs have not been created and promoted (at least at the administrative level) to address high-achieving students' special needs or characters but rather to convince heavily recruited students (and their parents) to attend a particular public institution as an inexpensive alternative to a private liberal arts college or university".

Although research on postsecondary honors education is somewhat limited (Bowman and Culver 2018), the potential outcomes of participating in honors education can include higher GPAs and rates of retention and completion (Bowman and Culver 2018). This is perhaps not surprising given the many benefits afforded to honors students, which include but are not limited to smaller classes, more rigorous coursework, honors-specific housing, priority course enrollment, honors-specific advising, and a greater number of academic, extracurricular, and scholarship opportunities (Astin 1993; Campbell 2005; Stich 2012). Despite the potential benefits and positive outcome data for honors students, many argue that these opportunities and benefits are the monopoly of a privileged few, upheld and made legitimate by meritocratic ideology (Galinova 2005; Stich 2012) troubles the "success scripts" constructed and promoted by honors education. Success scripts are "scripts or narratives that propose what success looks like for students; that (over)determine who has access to success; and that are reinforced structurally by our institutional practices, from our admissions procedures to pedagogical method to allocation of financial support" (Badenhausen 2018, p. 10). As part of the "honors ideology" (Galinova 2005), these narratives can function to alienate and exclude underrepresented students, which undermines public higher education's goal of increasing access. This is perhaps not a surprising consequence of honors education within public universities, which stands as "an illustrative consequence of the institutional growth of a higher education system based on egalitarian access and meritocratic distribution of educational opportunities" (Galinova 2005, p. 2).

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[3] The National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC 2018) is a U.S. non-profit organization "designed to support and promote undergraduate honors education" (https://www.nchchonors.org/about-nchc, para. 2).

[4] Honors education has taken on different organizational form over time and is used to describe program-level, departmental, and university-wide honors programs as well as stand-alone honors colleges.

4. Methodology

As part of a larger study, the research informing this paper derives from an embedded multi-case study approach (Yin 2013). This approach allowed for a more focused, in-depth, rich, and holistic analysis (Merriam 1990) of tracking within two particular universities that are similar in structure, organization, selectivity, and rank. Within each university (case), embedded cases included three distinct tracks: the honors track, the developmental track, and the traditional track. In order to attain both breadth and depth within each case, qualitative methods include semi-structured and in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and the collection of artifacts/documents. For the purposes of this article, data are limited to Regional University (pseudonym)[5] and its honors track. Although both institutions in the larger study show varying degrees of stratification, Regional's Honors College best demonstrates the ways in which stratification intensifies and deepens within the micro-dimensions of social institutions.

4.1. Regional University

Barron's classifies Regional University as a four-year, "competitive" public university that is primarily residential with a higher transfer-in rate. As a category, however, the term "competitive" can be misleading. According to Barron's, "competitive" institutions, like Regional, admit 75–80 percent of applicants, and among incoming students, the average ACT[6] (college entrance exam) score is between 21–23. This category is relative to the "most competitive" institutions that admit fewer than one third of applicants who, on average, have a 29 or higher ACT. Within this hierarchy, Regional sits just at the border of the "competitive" and "less competitive" categories as incoming first-year students enter with an average ACT of 20.5. Contributing to the larger tracking structure on campus, incoming first-year students are admitted to Regional as traditional students, honors students (into the Honors College), or through the Academic Opportunity Program (AOP), an alternative admissions program for students who show academic potential but do not have scores that meet admissions standards. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to include data from the traditional and developmental tracks at Regional, it is important to locate the honors track and its students within the context of the university's tracking structure. Though predominantly white, Regional has undergone targeted recruitment efforts that have generated increased racial and ethnic diversity on campus. Not unlike other public institutions in the U.S., a significant percentage of students are categorized as low-income or working class (roughly 50% of Regional's 2016 first-year students received Pell grants and roughly the same percentage were identified by the institution as first-generation college students).[7] Table 1 provides contrasting profiles of 2016 incoming, first-year students by track and corresponding four- and six-year graduation rates.

During the time of this study, like so many other public state institutions across the United States, Regional was struggling to sustain itself amidst a state budget crisis, declining student enrollment, and growing competition within the field of higher education. When an institution is struggling to sustain itself, priorities become ever clearer. At Regional, this was evident in its continued efforts toward the recruitment and admission of the region's highest-achieving students. For the purpose of this article, findings reflect data collected from students affiliated with the honors track at Regional university

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[5] In order to protect the identities of participants, all institutional, programmatic, and individual proper names have been given pseudonyms and when necessary, unique details about the institution and the Honors College have also been altered.

[6] Historically, the ACT has dominated admissions processes within Midwestern colleges and universities; however, recent changes have resulted in a turn toward the SAT. During data collection (2016–2017), the ACT was still the most common standardized college entrance exam taken by students in the study.

[7] For this project, the number of Pell Grant recipients and students' first-generation status are used as proxies for socioeconomic status. Although the definition of first-generation college student varies within higher education literature, data on the number of first-generation students at Regional was collected from the Office of Financial Aid, which relies upon information reported within the Free Application for Financial Aid (FAFSA). FAFSA defines first-generation as students who are the first in their family to attend college.

and honors staff and affiliated faculty who shape and influence students' experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. In this case, academic advisors and the Dean of the Honors College were purposefully selected while faculty members were selected by way of snowball sampling. Student participants were then selected primarily from the classes of participating faculty members. Again, for relational purposes and in order to locate Regional's honors students within the larger university context, Table 2 shows student participant demographics by track.

Table 1. Embedded Cases: New First-Year Student Profile, 2016.

	ACT Score *	High School GPA *	% Minority	Graduation Rate *
Traditional Admit	20.9	3.21	37%	Four-year 29% Six-year 56%
Developmental Admit	17.9	2.56	84%	Four-year 15% Six-year 31%
Honors Admit	28.5	3.98	7%	Four-year 63% Six-year 83%

* ACT Scores are based upon the average score of incoming first-year students in 2016. * High School (HS) Grade Point Average (GPA) reflects the average GPA of incoming first-year students in 2016. * Graduation rates reflect fall 2010 cohorts, Regional Office of Institutional Research.

Table 2. Student Participant Demographics by Track.

	Self-Identified Gender	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	First Generation
Traditional Track (*n* = 15)	Female = 7 Male = 8	White = 6 Black = 7 Hispanic/Latinx = 2	6 (neither parent attended college)
Developmental Track (*n* = 15)	Female = 8 Male = 7	White = 4 Black = 8 Hispanic/Latinx = 3	9 (neither parent attended college)
Honors Track (*n* = 16)	Female = 11 Male = 5	White = 13 Black = 3	* 8 (neither parent attended college)

* Although the percentage of honors student participants who are first-generation college students is similar to that of student participants within other academic tracks, only one honors student admitted to the Honors College upon entry to the university is a first generation college student. Findings demonstrate differences within the honors student population, between those admitted into honors upon entry to Regional and those who are invited to join the Honors College as transfer students or after meeting GPA requirements after their first term.

4.2. Methods

Following IRB approval,[8] I interviewed 16 students in the Honors College, 15 students in one developmental program, and 15 traditional students during the 2016–2017 academic year. I also interviewed 10 key faculty affiliated with each track, the directors of the honors and developmental/remedial programs at Regional and the director of university admissions. In total, I interviewed 59 student, faculty, and staff participants at Regional University. Participants include both male and female participants who reflect the racial/ethnic diversity on campus and represent diverse disciplinary backgrounds. The selected number of student and faculty participants allowed for sufficient levels of saturation among data within each case (university) and sub-case (tracks) (Patton 2015). This design specifies a "minimum sample based upon expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study" (Patton 2015, p. 314).

[8] This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Northern Illinois on 14 June 2016 (protocol number HS16-0203).

Interviews lasted approximately one hour, on average, and were audio-recorded. Students were asked open-ended questions about their educational and familial backgrounds, their aspirations, and their future plans. They were also asked to reflect upon their academic and personal experiences at Regional and within their respective academic tracks. Faculty members were asked similar questions about their own educational and familial backgrounds and invited to reflect upon their experiences at Regional and within their respective tracks. Interviews were de-identified and transcribed as completed. During the fall of 2016, I also attended and observed relevant university and program events (e.g., honors-specific functions) "to provide a relatively incontestable description for further analysis and ultimate reporting" (Stake 1995, p. 62). Additionally, I took general campus observation/field notes in an effort to describe the culture within which these tracks have emerged. Finally, during the 2016–2017 academic year, I collected relevant documents that inform the research, including, but not limited to, course syllabi, course listings/offerings, public documents/materials, policy documents, information on the admissions process, annual reports (including those created by/for the honors and developmental programs), and online materials (e.g., department websites).

4.3. Data Analysis

Interview data were transcribed by an external source, reviewed by the researcher to maintain anonymity (pseudonyms were given to participants and institutions other potential identifying information) and edited to correct typos or inaudible sections of text. Transcript data were then uploaded to NVivo (QSR International 2018), a software program specifically designed to assist in the analysis of qualitative data. Coding occurred in two stages. Data were first coded deductively using codes consistent with the framing of this study (Miles et al. 2014). Example initial deductive codes included "educational background" and "educational opportunities". In the second stage, "focused coding," allowed for a deeper analysis of the data through the narrowing of previous codes and the addition of new inductive codes, resulting in the emergence of themes (Saldaña 2013). Following the coding and analysis of each embedded case (within-case analysis), I conducted a cross-case analysis, allowing for the examination of themes across both embedded cases to determine which are common or different (Stake 1995). Observation data and documents were coded using the same procedures. Trustworthiness (validity) of data was established and enhanced throughout the research process via the utilization of the triangulation of methods and peer review of coding.

5. Findings: Degrees of Access to Levels of Excellence

At Regional University, the larger academic tracking structure is delineated by students' admission to the university and is a clear extension of students' past academic performance. Although there is indeed some opportunity to move in and out of any particular track (e.g., from the traditional track to honors); track flexibility becomes more durable under explicit and implicit policies and practices that function instead to effectively maintain inequality. Within this larger tracking structure, responses to meeting the competing goals of providing access and maintaining academic excellence served to further stratify students by race and class. Findings below demonstrate the ways in which the institution and its Honors College aimed to diversify honors education by opening access while maintaining advantage for an already privileged few.

5.1. For the Meritorious: Structuring the Space of "Earned" Excellence

Not unlike honors colleges and programs across the U.S., honors students at Regional University, those who are, as the Dean of the Honors College noted, the "best and the brightest," and "gifted and talented," are provided with an enhanced curriculum and opportunities for leadership, professional development, and personal interaction with Regional's "best professors". At Regional, honors students are purportedly subject to a more rigorous, engaged college experience that rewards students with access to more elite forms of knowledge, greater opportunities, and extra financial supports. This description aligns with what faculty, staff, and students affiliated with the Honors College describe

as a "private college within a public comprehensive university," providing students with a vast set of opportunities and privileges, including curricular and pedagogical differentiation. As the Dean of Regional's Honors College explains:

> "Well honestly, a public university, the honors college should be the driving force. This thing right here, it's kind of like this, in the early days of our republic, most of the colleges were small private schools. And we still have those around us. We have some really good ones—really top flight. And the advantage is it's a small liberal arts college where you have one faculty member for about 18 students. And they have all kinds of wonderful interactions, and it's just like a big family. Well the problem is, it's going to cost you about 75 to 80 thousand dollars a year to go to school. You can't afford that unless you have some wealth. And most of these colleges are highly endowed, so they can provide scholarships to offset that for a lot of good students. But what we do is we've taken this, and put it right smack dab here, in the middle of the public university! See the concept? So, we have a smaller group of highly intensive students and we provide courses and travel opportunities and things. And we have additional scholarships they can't get any place else. That's the concept, so you take what would be a small [private liberal arts college] and you put it right smack dab here. They can take advantage of . . . has the benefits of the private university within a public university setting."

For honors students, curricular requirements include taking honors-students-only general education courses that indeed reflect course offerings at more elite liberal arts institutions (e.g., Postmodern Literature, The Politics of Aesthetics, and Game Theory). Also consistent with small liberal arts colleges, honors students, staff, and faculty spoke of small class sizes that are typically discussion-based and aim to promote deeper, critical thinking. Many of these courses, taught primarily by hand-selected, sought-after faculty, not only provide students with "enhanced" academic experiences, but also (doubly) count toward general university education credit hours, potentially saving honors students both time and money. In addition to these potential benefits, other opportunities include specialized advisement, early course registration, discounts at local participating businesses, living in honor-specific dorms, and obtaining a distinction on one's transcript.

When asked about the purpose of an honors education at the postsecondary level, faculty, staff, and students responded with similar insights relative to the need to challenge high-performing students and to provide a marker of distinction that will help the "best students stand out". For example, the following honors students are representative of their honors peers:

> Kiera (first year): "I just wanted to be seen as one of those people who are at the top of their class. So that's another reason why I wanted to join the honors. It'll set me aside from other people that I'm trying to get into the career field with."

> Justin (third year): "Okay, I think it's just for students who really want to . . . they really want to show that they're, I guess, that they're truly dedicated to being a good student, you know? Not that you can't be without it but if you really want to have something positive to show like an employer some day or a graduate school or anything, they can just really see that you took these above and beyond classes and it's nice that Regional gives you that opportunity to go one step up."

> Rachel (second year): "I think it is to help honors students or those who achieve more. We already know that there's sometimes issues with the learning system where some people have to go into lower classes. And sometimes the . . . I don't know how to say . . . sometimes the smarter students or the ones who catch things on quicker don't get to reach their full potential."

Kerry, an academic advisor to honors students reinforces the notion that the purpose of an honors education is to challenge academically-talented, high-achieving students and better position them for their futures:

> "I think, especially a campus like ours, it's to make sure that the students who are really invested in their education get challenged, that they have opportunities for mentoring, for networking, just to make them—so many of them are thinking about grad school, and how do we make them competitive? How do we make them prepared for that, I think, is really what it is."

Similarly, Judith, another academic adviser to honors students, stated:

> "In terms of its function for students, yes, it's a way for students who are high-achieving students to kind of formalize and channel how they want to stand apart and give them more ways to set themselves apart and prepare themselves for what they're going to do later on."

However, before discussing how honors allows high-achieving students to stand out, Judith stressed the recruitment function of honors:

> "I don't want to reduce it to just a recruiting, but it certainly serves a function of recruiting, having a home for students who are high-achieving students, so that they feel like there's going to be something here for them at the university. And so, since I do a lot recruiting and we think a lot about recruiting, obviously having an Honors College is a help when you are trying to attract high-quality students to come to a university . . . "

Deeper conversations with advisers and the Dean not only revealed the recruitment function of honors, but positioned it as an institutional selling point that enables the university to better compete within the larger field. In a revealing conversation with Kerry (advisor), she mentioned the use of honors as a way to shift the reputation of Regional, a college that she said had "a reputation of taking anyone". During this time, Kerry witnessed pushes to increase admissions criteria and an intentional move to provide new merit scholarships to the highest-performing students "in order to raise ACT scores". These merit-based scholarships, developed by upper-administration and the Dean of the Honors College, primarily provide students who received high ACT scores with full tuition. Dean Summers explains:

> "When I started here, I worked with the administration, and I can't take the credit for it, but I worked with the administration to create a different type of scholarship. And so we have a merit scholarship. And today if a student scores a 30 ACT, we can offer them full tuition. It does not include room and board, but I work with them with the Foundation Office to see if we can back-fill, and to cover the rest of those expenses. And then, of course that doesn't include students who receive full academic scholarships. We have a number of them that get the full ride. So we—I constantly target those students. Now, of course, like any other university, we buy lists of who these students are. We know who's applied here, and so I'll target students that have high ACT."

While the growth of honors and the influx of high-performing honors students allowed Regional to better compete with other similar types of institutions, the larger discourse surrounding the need to "diversify" higher education in general, and honors education, in particular, influenced policies and practices. This is perhaps best illustrated by attempts to rectify the exclusionary history of the Honors College and broaden access to underrepresented student populations.

5.2. Diversifying Exclusion: Stratifying the Space of "Earned" Excellence

Despite the programmatic history of exclusion, staff, including the Dean, expressed interest in and a commitment to increasing access to the Honors College at Regional University. For example,

the Dean cited recent efforts to diversify Honors to better reflect the diversity on campus. In fact, one advisor mentioned that although the "minority numbers were not going up as hoped," one temporary staff member introduced a new way to target students who "are not usually on their radar" (e.g., students who did not meet the admissions criteria upon admission but are "still really good students"). The new approach aims to identify these students, track them after their first semester, and if they meet the required GPA, recruit them into the Honors College. It was also noted that 90 percent of these students were students of color. This includes, of course, students in Regional's alternative admissions program, whom the Dean referred to in our formal interview as "diamonds in the rough". Staff considered their efforts to expand and increase access successful for many reasons. The Honors College nearly doubled in size and the minority student population grew since Dean Summers began his tenure. Indeed, according to Dean Summers, the Honors College was "bursting at the seams".

However, immediately following this conversation, Dean Summers cautioned that any growth must be balanced and managed. As other staff also mentioned, many students will drop out or transfer out of Regional or leave the Honors College. Because of this, Dean Summers focuses on what he calls "playing to the top end":

> "What I do, I personally work on that top end . . . When you compare honors colleges, don't compare them to the other students on campus, you compare them to other honors colleges . . . Is it growing? Are we offering opportunities for them? Are they traveling abroad? Are they getting scholarships? Are they getting into the grad schools of their choice? That's where you have to, that's our job, is to take care of the top end [of students], and hope that we can work with the bottom end, and they can come in here. It's always open if they want to work at it."

As the voice of honors at Regional, Dean Summers projects the strong, meritocratic values espoused and valorized by Western nations and their social institutions. As Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) assert, "Modern Western societies operate on the premise that status is achieved rather than inherited. Meritocracy—a system in which rewards are distributed based on individual merit . . . serves to legitimate the status hierarchy in modern industrial democracies . . . " (p. 2). Not only did Dean Summers take an active role in developing merit-based scholarships that funnel the highest-achieving students into the Honors College (e.g., those receiving the highest award upon admission to the university are required to participate in the Honors College), he also reinforced meritocratic ideology throughout our interview. As he stated, the Honors College is open to "the bottom end," "if they want to work at it." It is perhaps not surprising that this ideology is also deeply embodied by the Honors College itself, its affiliated staff, faculty, and students. As boldly expressed on the first page of an honors promotional brochure, "membership is based solely on merit". By working to the "top end," Dean Summers acknowledges that not all honors students are created equal at Regional, and only those at the "top end" have earned the attention and recognition of the Dean. This, of course, has strong implications for those who are not part of the Honors College.

Although staff voiced a commitment to, and have been successful in increasing access to, the Honors College, Honors itself presents a hierarchical structure wherein the most access is provided at the "lower-end" of the program, while students at the "top," those perceived to have earned their position entirely through their own merit, are provided with the most support and resources, and are held to the highest of expectations. In this case, the program itself mimics the hierarchical structure of the system of higher education itself wherein access is provided widely at the lower tiers while remaining exclusionary at the top.

Through the "Front Door, Side Door, or Back Door"

Subtle mechanisms that function to stratify the Honors College are revealed through students' point of entry. Students can enter the Honors College through what the Dean referred to as the "three doors": the "front door," upon admission to university; the "side door," as a transfer student;

or the "back door," as a traditional student later identified by GPA during or after their first year of coursework. These three doors, however, sort and separate students within the Honors College, providing them with differential access to information, types of knowledge, financial supports, and engagement. For example, students admitted to the Honors College upon admission to the university (front-door admits) are more likely to be those identified as "the best and brightest," those positioned at the very top of the Honors College by their prior academic achievement. Admission to the university via the Honors College requires not just a particular GPA, as is the case with back-door and side-door admits, but a particular high school class ranking and/or specific ACT score. In fact, Regional places notable emphasis upon ACT scores, which alone determines whether a student receives the greatest amount of funding. For example, students with a composite ACT score of 30 or greater automatically receive a full scholarship, which also requires them to participate in the Honors College. In addition to varying financial supports, front-door admits are also more likely to benefit from other special opportunities. As Dean Summers reflected, "Well, if I got these kids with 35 and 36 ACTs,[9] I better give them something to do because they're going to get pretty bored sitting in a classroom, right? Let's harness their enthusiasm." During our interview, the Dean described some of the ways the Honors College engages its most "high-powered" students. For example, the Dean teaches a course wherein he hand-selects a small group of the "most talented students" with the goal of preparing them to apply for prestigious academic awards, like the Goldwater Scholarship, Fulbright, and Rhodes. Front-door admits also seem to have a better chance of being asked to be part of the Honors College's Public Policy Committee. As members, students are deemed "policy fellows," another marker of prestige to add to resumés that are likely to include a history of similar opportunities. In addition to these kinds of opportunities, which provide direct access to elite/dominant forms of capital, front-door admits are also more likely to live in the honors-specific residence hall and have more contact hours with the Honors College because of the way they are enculturated into the College upon their arrival to the university.

In contrast, the opportunities and benefits of honors are often either unknown to many "side-door and back-door" students or are so minimal that many see the mark of distinction on their transcript as the only notable benefit to being part of the Honors College. This can be attributed, at least in part, to students' limited level of engagement with the Honors College. Below, Samantha, a second-year, back-door admit, reflects upon an experience common to other students who were admitted to the Honors College after admission to the university:

> Interviewer: "How much contact have you had with the Honors College so far?"
>
> Samantha: "Not very much. They have meetings but, honestly, with how much homework I get and all my other responsibilities, it's not a priority for me to go. And I wish that I had more time and more willingness to go, but I don't [laughter]."
>
> Interviewer: "How do you hear about those things?"
>
> Samantha: "We get emails from the honors counselors, so I meet with my honors adviser at least once a semester, but you're supposed to meet with them twice. I think [chuckles]. So, yeah."
>
> Interviewer: "So you meet with them and what happens in those meetings?"
>
> Samantha: "My meetings so far with my adviser have just been like, 'Here are the classes that the honors college is offering, and you can choose to take this.'"

[9] The highest score one can receive on the ACT is a 36.

This limited level of contact and engagement for particular honors students is perhaps not surprising given the sheer number of students in the Honors College, a number spread thinly across a somewhat limited staff. Below, Judith (advisor) describes a sizable honors student population:

> Interviewer: "How would you describe honors students? Would you talk about them differently than the general student population?"
>
> Judith: "Okay . . . We have students who are just amazing and then there are students who would struggle, and they worked really hard, but sometimes they have difficulty with certain areas like math or science and that brings them down a little bit. And, so when you have 1500 students, it's hard to say, 'they're like this,' because they're all over the place."
>
> Interviewer: "That's true. That's a wide variety."
>
> Judith: "But they are in general, very enthusiastic and they work very hard and there's the fact that they chose to join themselves. We don't just say, 'Everybody who fits into this category is in the Honors College.'"

Importantly, Judith's description of 1500 students who are "all over the place" suggests that the academic lines between honors and non-honors begin to blur as participation expands, leaving the only clean division between honors students and their non-honors peers as one defined by membership as a form of social distinction. In other words, efforts to capture a greater number of students may lead to greater racial and class-based diversity, but it also creates a potential space wherein deeper levels of stratification emerge. For example, although honors student participants felt "special" holding honors distinction, those admitted via the side-door or back door, as previously mentioned, had very little engagement with the Honors College beyond brief advisement meetings and the few required general education classes, which in effect, precluded access to the opportunities available to them. Julie, a sophomore recruited to the Honors College after her first semester is representative of honors student participants who entered honors via the "back door":

> Julie: "I know they say, 'You should try to get this to get involved and to be a community,' but I always saw it as something to put on a transcript. Just to have, 'I'm in this honors program.' It looks good, but I don't necessarily like doing all the extra community stuff."
>
> Interviewer: "Yeah do you think it's going to be a benefit in the long run?"
>
> Julie: "I think so. I think in the long run it's definitely. It shows you can demonstrate like work ethic and to keep pushing yourself I guess, in that aspect."
>
> Interviewer: "Sure. Okay. Do you think you'd have a different experience if you weren't in the Honors College? If Regional didn't have it, do you think your experience would be similar?"
>
> Julie: "Honestly, I think it would be pretty similar. I'd still be probably getting the grades that I am, it just wouldn't feel nice at the end of a meeting to go, 'Yeah. I'm in this program.' I think, as a whole, I wouldn't be too affected if there wasn't a program."
>
> Interviewer: "Okay. So, you'll have that distinction on your transcript."
>
> Julie: "Yeah, that's probably about it, honestly."

Similarly, Jill, also a second-year student recruited after her first year at Regional and representative of other back-door admits, notes a thin level of engagement in the Honors College:

Interviewer: "Can you tell me about the Honors College? What are your thoughts about it? I know you talked to me a little bit already, but just your first course [one honors-specific course she had taken]. Did you have any other engagement with the Honors College?"

Jill: "Personally, no, but I have some friends who are doing the other one [higher distinction]. They talk about how it's stressful, but you have to get a topic to have a question about and then you do research about it. So, I'm like, it sounds interesting, but I don't know what I would research right now. That's why I'm not doing that part."

This level of thin engagement is distinctively different from the degree of engagement and spatial separation of front-door admits. Anne, like other front-door admits, noted deeper engagement with the Honors College and honors peers because of spatial arrangements that functioned to isolate front-door admits from their peers:

Anne: "My dorm is the honors dorm, so yeah, my when I'm in my room, it's in the honors dorm. So, I know those people there that are honors kids and when I'm in honors classes. Then just even in classes that are not honors classes, I end up talking to the people who are honors people in air quotes, because I have a big personality. I'm loud, I answer all the questions. You want to answer all the questions and be loud? You sit by me. I know what's going on [laughter]."

Amanda, also a front-door honors admit in her first year at Regional, offered a similar description of a somewhat segregated experience:

Amanda: "I didn't mean for it to happen, but I found that most of my friends are in the honors program. Especially on my floor too. Our floor is a little bit strange. We have the girl's side and the guy's side and like the thing in the middle that separates us. But our girl's side and our guy's side are really close too because we have a lot of the same classes together. Most of my best friends are on the floor with me."

Interestingly, although Anne and Amanda are representative of the kind of spatial isolation that can function to form boundaries around the students perceived to be the "best and the brightest," Francis, also a first-year, front-door admit, consciously and actively pushed against these boundaries. This was communicated most explicitly when Francis elected to live in a non-honors dorm. As he described in our interview, "I don't know, I'd like to put myself about average, right? And there are people way above me, people way below me. And I get to see them in my dorm. In the honors dorm, I don't think I'd get that. Also, everyone in the honors dorm that I've met has been pompous as all get out." As a bit of an outlier, Francis held strong opinions that challenged its larger purpose, the motivations behind some of its practices, and general perceptions of honors education:

Interviewer: "Did you choose to be part of the Honors College?"

Francis: "When I sent in my transcripts and my scores for things, they were like, "Oh, you can get this scholarship." And I was like, oh, read the fine print, it requires me to be in the Honors College, which had I not gotten that [the scholarship], I probably wouldn't be in the Honors College."

Interviewer: "Why is that?"

Francis: "Only well, I think it's a bit of a sham, to be completely honest. I think that when you put honors in anything . . . I like the idea of grouping gifted students, that's fine. But when you put it on something, when you have a club for it, when you have special activities for it, you're losing something. I understand that you're trying to get these people to form bonds with other people with merit. And more power to it. But I don't know, I feel like it's being

> marketed pretty hard rather than being idealized. People don't want to be in the Honors College because it means you're going to get a better education. They want to be in the Honors College because it gets you more money, it gets you new opportunities. And so, I just feel like the Honors College is doing something . . . they're not doing something wrong. They're getting themselves out there and getting more people in their program. I just feel like how people react to it, how people understand the college is wrong."

Further, once identified by the Honors College, it also became clear that students' grades could fluctuate without penalty, and as long as they satisfied requirements and graduated with a 3.4 GPA (an 89% on a 4.0 scale), they would secure honors distinction. As Judith explained: "Now, as far as GPA goes, it's most important when they join and it's important when they graduate. But in the meantime, it can go up and down." Allowing grades to fluctuate up and down can also blur the distinction between honors students and their non-honors peers, calling into question to the purpose of honors education.

Additionally, point of entry seems to loosely align with the three different "levels of honors distinction" awarded upon graduation. Students can "choose" to fulfill various degrees of distinction when they become members of the Honors College, which include "full honors distinction" (student must meet full academic requirements), "concentrated honors distinction" (student meets fewer academic requirements), or "partial honors distinction" (student meets minimum number of academic requirements which includes a minimal number of credit hours of honors general education classes). Although there is some flexibility in terms of movement between these sub-tracks, it is incredibly difficult for students to move into the top honors track unless they are admitted via the front door (once into the second year of coursework, it is considered too late to complete requirements for full honors distinction).

Thus, point of entry and the levels of honors distinction create invisible walls within the honors track itself, as the stratification within this track functions to provide greater access while also preserving the privilege of those at the top. Tellingly, the six study participants in the "top" tier of the Honors College were part of advanced tracks in high school. Only one is a first-generation student and five were considerably more "privileged" in terms of social class than their peers. In this case, it seems honors distinction plays out primarily at the top for those who "stand out". Given the hierarchical structure of the Honors College itself, it is not surprising that the opportunity structures and experiences of honors student participants who entered the Honors College via the "side door" or "back door" seem to be more similar to participants in the general student population than their front-door honors peers.

6. Discussion and Concluding Thoughts: Honoring Stratification

This research demonstrates the pervasive patterns of the past as they manifest within the under-researched depths of higher education. As stratification within systems of higher education grows, it is unlikely postsecondary tracking patterns are unique to the U.S. or that the micro-stratification of particular disciplines, programs, and pathways or tracks are exclusive to American colleges and universities. Regional University and its Honors College reveal an all too familiar clash between egalitarian principles and competitive excellence. It is perhaps not surprising that these tensions not only play out within our deeply stratified system of higher education (between institutions of higher education), but also *within* them. Similar processes that shape stratification within the larger system indeed exist *within* institutions, wherein the strongest rewards go to those at the top (honors admits), wherein it pays to imitate your betters ("elite" liberal arts within university), and where it is most prudent to expand (provide access) by creating new entities rather than increase enrollment within existing entities (stratifying honors itself) (Labaree 2017). In other words, as Labaree (2017) argues, every time they "raise the floor, they raise the ceiling." Every time the system increases access, there are mechanisms that ensure the preservation of class and racial privilege.

These patterns are evident in Regional's larger tracking structure and extend to the Honors College itself. By providing degrees of access to "excellence," the Honors College was able to (on

the surface, at least) satisfy discourses surrounding the need to diversify and broaden access to the exclusionary space of honors education while maintaining competitive excellence. However, without reconciling access and excellence in meaningful, concerted ways that challenge policies and practices rooted in meritocratic ideology, institutions like Regional will continue to contribute to reproducing the unequal social structure. This reconciliation is especially important as policy recommendations note the growth of honors programs as a way to strengthen two-year colleges (The Century Foundation 2013), the most "accessible" postsecondary institutions in the U.S.

Arguably, Americans have largely given higher education a free pass while continuing to chastise U.S. public education at the primary and secondary levels. Although public education needs sustained attention and improvement, we must call equal attention to the troubling conditions, processes, practices, and policies that contribute to deepening levels of inequality within the postsecondary sector. Indeed, decades of secondary tracking research has insufficiently addressed concerns within higher education. This neglect allows problems to persist, leaving the more silent and invisible mechanisms that reproduce inequalities to breed and to flourish.

Try as we might to reverse or dismantle the mechanisms that stratify, new divisions grow up out of the old like an homage to an unequal past. It is clear that breaking with these stubborn patterns requires challenging the very mechanisms to which we cling with something akin to moral purpose. For example, efforts to expand and increase access to postsecondary education are rarely questioned; doing so requires us to challenge a pervasive rhetorical structure surrounding democratic education that, though perhaps unwittingly, has been picked up and exploited by those with the most power and privilege (Lucas 2017). Lucas (2017) recommends that those in a position to rethink and implement educational policy consider specific ways of "dislodging an EMI dynamic" (p. 25), which includes making use of rhetorical resources in order to "reshape the terrain upon which the reform must be pursued" (p. 25). Although Lucas suggests avoiding the framing of reform in a language that "easily elicit[s] skepticism, fear, and/or dismissiveness" (p. 22), I argue emphasis should also be placed upon challenging well-worn language that can easily be co-opted by those in power, and through this process, lose all meaning and purpose. Specifically, within higher education, policy actors should deeply and critically consider efforts that hyper-focus on "increasing access" by asking how the language of access itself has been co-opted, by whom, and for whom in order to maintain the status quo. Importantly, these critical considerations should be part of any effort aiming to uncover and upend the powerful mechanisms that reproduce inequality.

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