

# Humans of the Honors College: Using Photovoice as a Process for Developing an Ethnographic Assessment of Culture within the USF Honors College

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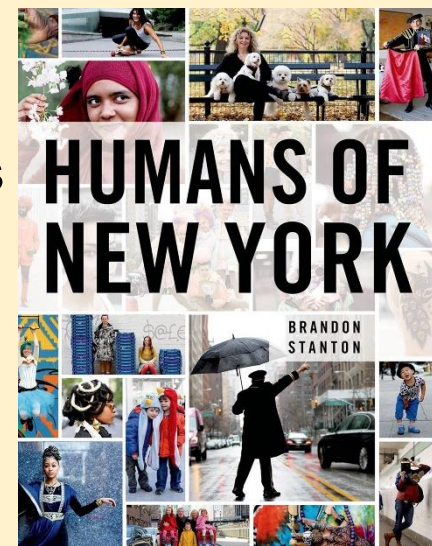
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## Introduction

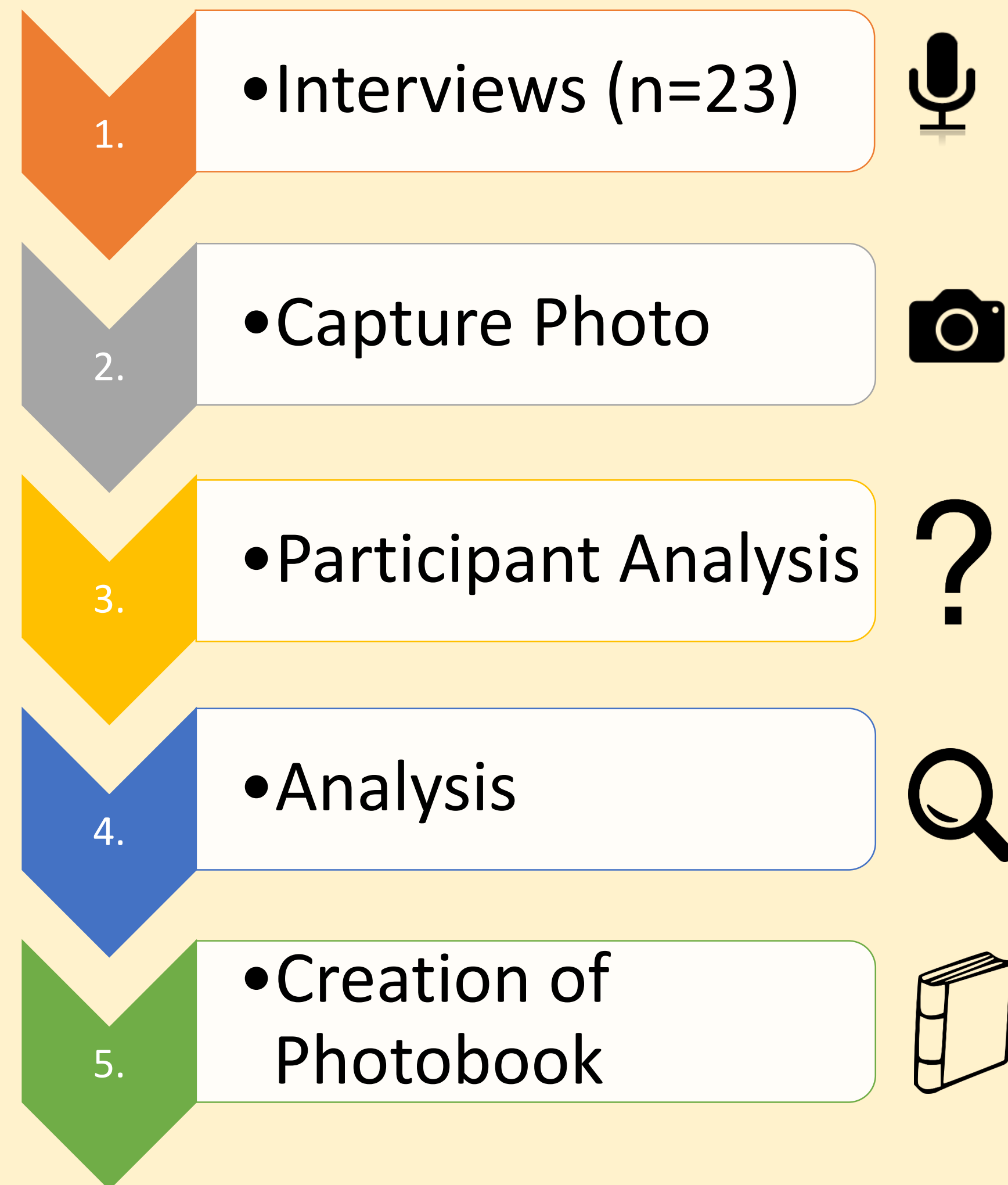
The USF Honors College is a unique community of students and faculty within the University of South Florida. The Honors College identifies three distinct "pillars" or cultural foundations to its program mission: academics, global experience and community engagement. These program ideals have been presented as major aspects that constitute Honors College cultural identity. But how do Honors College representatives assess the success of the Honors program? Do the preconceived expectations of the program really align with the experiences gained by the students and faculty? There is a very shallow pool of information that exists from current methods to assess whether the Honors College community is meeting the expectations of its members in these areas. Right now, the only major source of information on the status of these areas comes from the 2015-2016 Honors College Annual Fact Report. What's more, this information is solely quantitative and is a resource not readily available to all USF Honors College community members.

The aim of this project is to investigate if the intended ideals and expectations of the Honors College culture align with the perceived reality of cultural identity among Honors College community members. Photovoice, or the use of photographic techniques to identify, represent, and enhance a community, is a tool used in visual anthropology to perform ethnographic research on culture and society. I propose that using a method combining Photovoice and interviewing processes could help bridge gaps between the expectations and reality of the Honors College culture and provide an effective qualitative metric of analysis of the culture. The limited information on the success of the Honors College in meeting cultural program expectations is a crucial problem. Though quantitative metrics are important in assessment of a culture, it is my belief that assessment of the culture from the uniquely qualitative perspective of the students and faculty can expand on information currently known and provide more relevant insight into the effectiveness of currently used methods.

In the summer of 2010 the Humans of New York photographic project was developed by Brandon Stanton. It is a catalog of the city's inhabitants showing a wide range of individuals in a variety of places and settings with associated quotes and short stories. The Humans of New York project served as a model for my approach to performing qualitative research to assess the USF Honors College. The result of this project is the creation my own photographic project entitled Humans of the Honors College.



## Methods



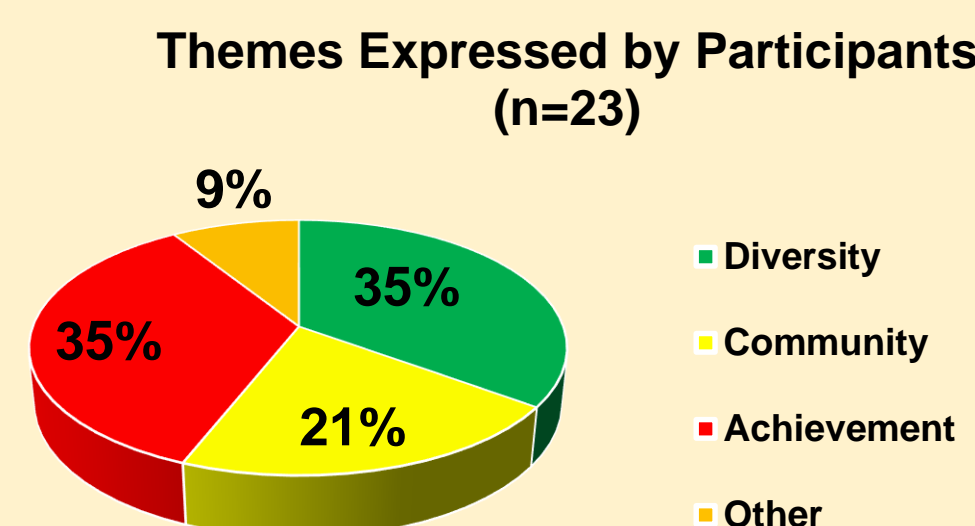
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## Research Question:

Do expectations of the Honors College culture align with the perceived reality of cultural identity among Honors College community members?

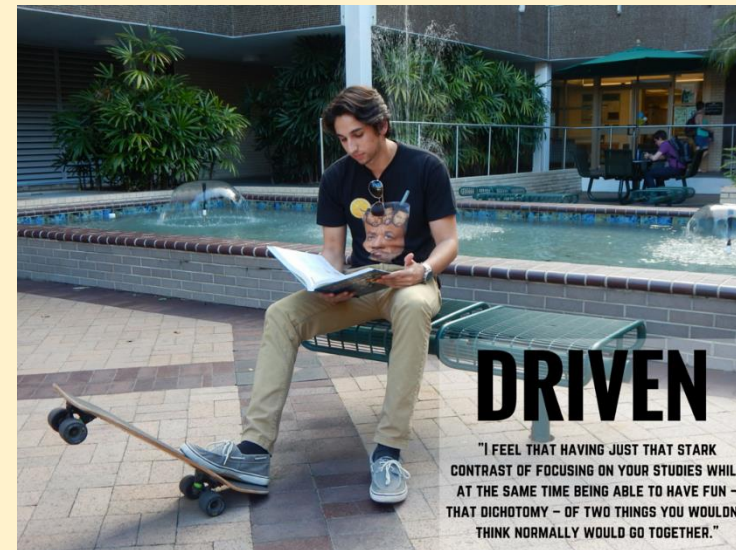
## Results/Findings



### Academics

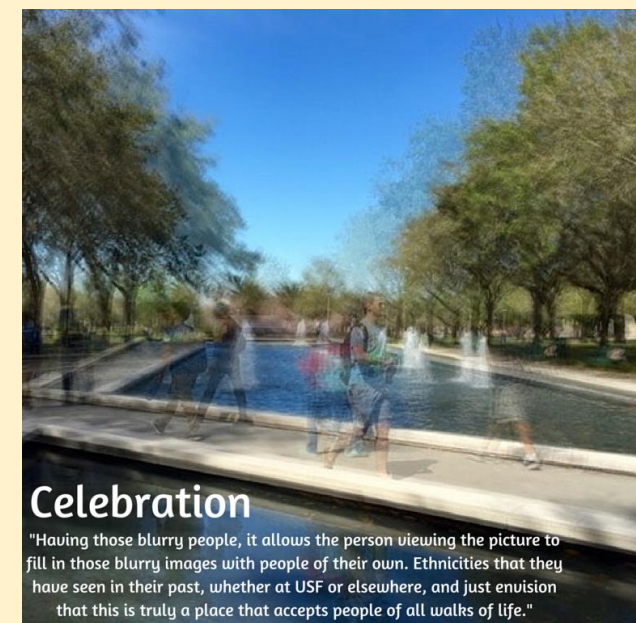


Ahmed Mohamed

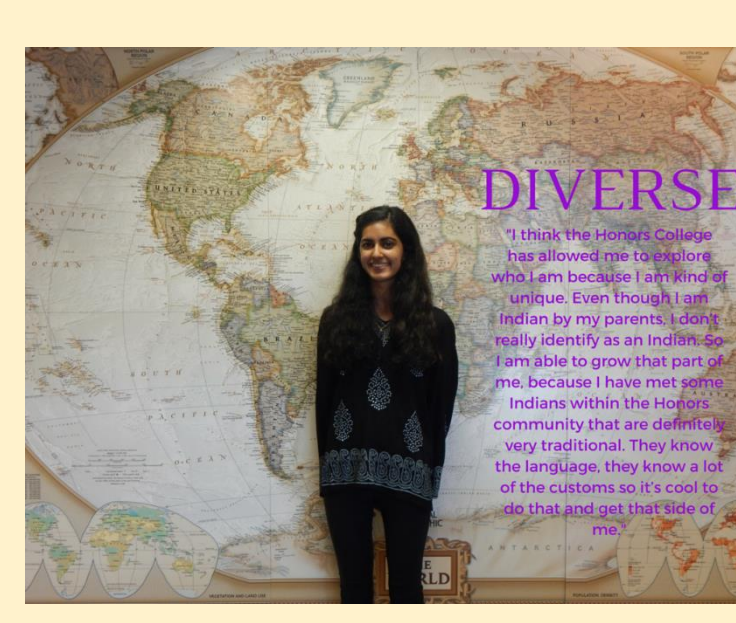


Achintya Patel

### Global Experience



Juan Hernandez

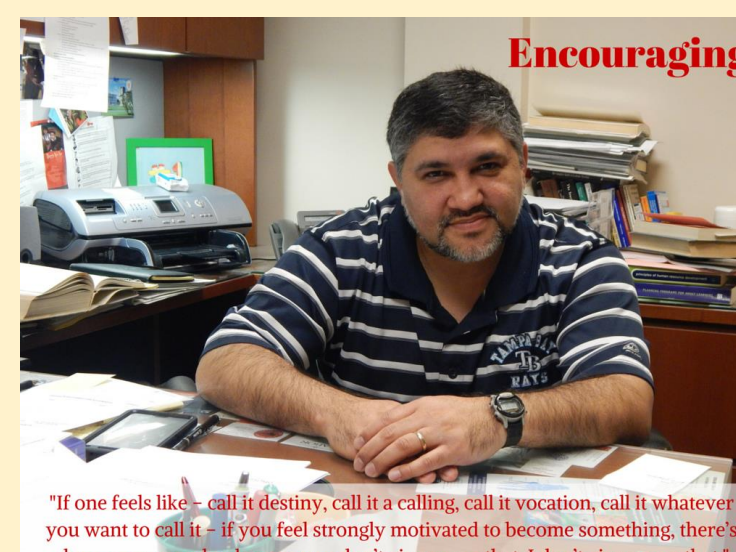


Karina Rao

### Community Engagement



Elizabeth Moore



Arnaldo Mejias

"...what I do see being consistent in almost all members of the Honors College is a desire to thrive and to achieve." – Kevin Dennis

"...the things that make being an Honors College student here different from being the other kinds of students was kind of like an active responsibility. You weren't just there because you were supposed to be there. You were there because you wanted to be there, because you were trying to do something." – Samantha Gomes

"...currently a lot of the Honors courses are very theoretical, which is good, but I think there is definitely something to gain from expanding how many of those hands-on, practical skill classes we have." – Kevin Dennis

"I feel the way it's often played out is that you fulfill that requirement with a humanities course and there's not as much exposure to the Arts as there can be." – Ahmed Mohamed

"Because I feel like the Honors College and even USF as a whole, it embraces diversity. But not only embraces it, but celebrates it. People don't feel like they have to hide their differences. It's something that I actually enjoy seeing. Or learning about other people's cultures or people's customs. So it's very open, very tolerant." – Juan Hernandez

"And the Honors College has definitely helped me connect with people more and ask them more broad questions and really expand my horizons on cultures that I never knew about." – Elizabeth Moore

"I feel like I'd add more cultural events maybe because a lot of cultural events are hosted by different organizations and that's a good thing, but since the Honors College is so diverse I feel like it'll be better for them to host a few things to make people feel more welcome." – Shae Brown

"I would love to be able to do a better job of bringing into the college a more diverse population of students and a more diverse population of faculty." – Dean Charles Adams

"... We are very much a work family. We tease each other and joke with each other, but we also support each other and cover for each other....We take care of each other personally and professionally." – Cayla Lanier

"I think that with being surrounded by students in the Honors College as well – like-minded students – that you are able to not only challenge yourself but foster relationships that help to improve yourself and also improve the college." – Ashley Derisme

"I think with new space, – and new space that is designed specifically to create community and to create a more tight-knit feel – that we could interact more consistently with our students in a number of different ways." – Arnaldo Mejias

I'd love to see a better space for informal hanging out and interactions between those three in order to see what comes of it." – Cayla Lanier

## Conclusions/Implications

The results from this project show that the ideals and expectations of the Honors College culture are currently being met with varying degrees of success. Each of the three pillars of the Honors College were in their own right met by interviewed participants. This was proven through the photos and interview responses that were clearly meant to showcase academics, global experience, and community engagement as a priority in their cultural identity within the Honors College. Though each the three pillars of the Honors College culture were met, some were met to a larger extent than others. From this sample size, it was found that 35% of the sample identified with diversity and achievement as major concepts to define the Honors College, while 21% identified with community and 9% identified in a different means. These calculations were determined from the grouping of verbal words given to describe the Honors College culture. The names of the groups of words that expressed the themes are words that I coined, however they do encompass the overarching themes of the word groups. It can be concluded from this data that the words align with the three main Honors College cultural values: academics with achievement, global experience with diversity, and community engagement with community. There was one more category in the derived groups termed "other" and this outlier group proved that there lies a discrepancy with what the Honors College members are identifying with culturally within the community. This gap in communication was bridged using this visual ethnographic method of assessing the Honors College culture.

The approach and methods used to assess the Honors College cultural identity proved to be effective in garnering a new perspective and qualitative metric for the Honors College community to utilize in their assessment of the college program. This method allowed for both students and faculty to actively engage in discussion regarding the current state of the Honors College culture and utilize Photovoice to enhance the viewer's understanding of the intricacies of the Honors College community. Using this method, Honors College community members were provided with the opportunity to feel represented, connected and plugged in to the analysis of the Honors College program. The project also allowed for the participants to express any perceived discontentment with the program. For example, in this project highlighted improvements across all 23 interviews involved more variation in courses offered by the Honors College, a more diverse population of students represented in the Honors College by major, better structure and guidance throughout the process of writing Honors thesis for upperclassmen, and the creation of more mutual living space between Honors students, faculty, and staff.

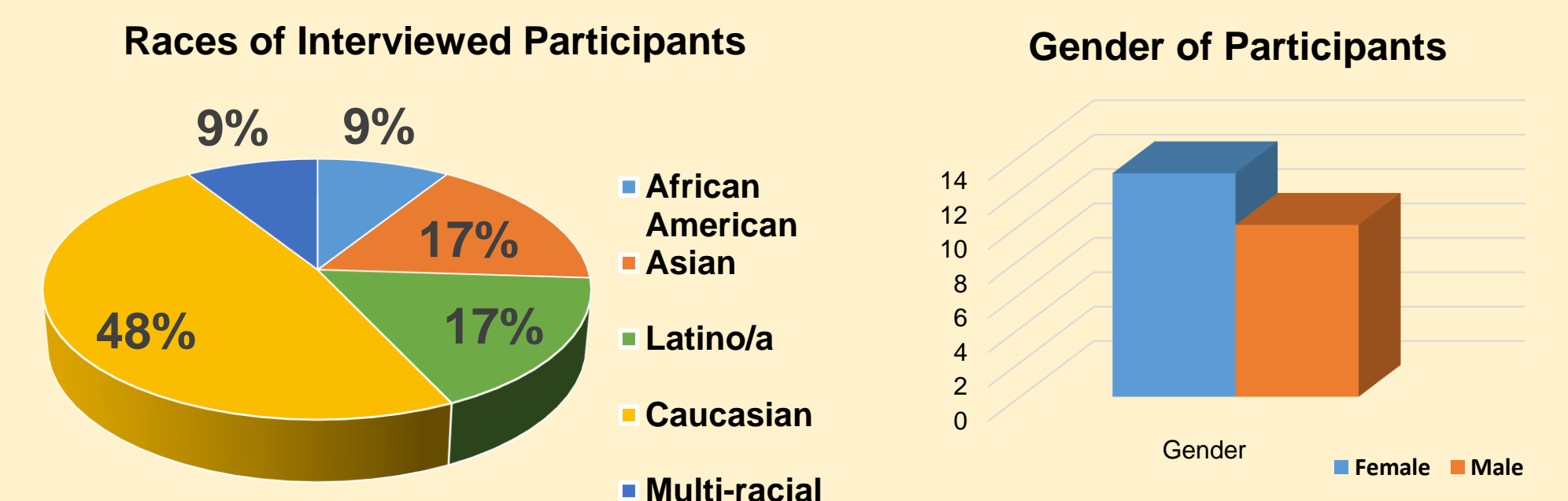
The implications behind this project are numerous. The creation of more photobooks using this method could prove to be advantageous for the Honors College. As a tool, this method of acquiring qualitative data provides a new vantage point for Honors College representatives to evaluate their program as well as allow students and faculty to see how other community members identify with this society. This method of cultural analysis can serve as a way to assist in Honors College recruitment and promotion. With the widely popular influence of the *Humans of New York* project in today's society, a project that utilizes this platform as a way to market to potential Honors USF Honors College applicants may have significant impact on enrollment. Having a research basis on such a successful project such as *Humans of New York* allows for the impact that *Humans of the Honors College* could have to be that much more prominent. *Humans of New York* is a worldwide project and since the inspiration behind this project mirrors that one, Honors College community members may be more willing to utilize this form of communication in the future. If this project is made available as a resource to prospective students, it could provide them with the opportunity to learn more about the cultural dynamic that is planned to be fostered within this college community. *Humans of the Honors College* can also serve as a means for assisting in the retention of Honors students who may wish to leave the program due to unfulfilled expectations and lack of effective communication. This project would serve as a bridge for this gap in communication to allow for these students to feel their message is being heard.

## Future Research

The continuation of this project could provide valuable quantitative data to the Honors College community. For future research it is suggested that a wider study sample be taken for research. The number of participants in this study was small and it is suggest that to see better results a wider sample size be taken. The current demographics of the study participants was relatively small when comparing race and gender. Though loosely representative of the overall statistic data, it is suggested that this data be reassessed following increase in participants to better represent this community.

The continuation of this project could take on a wide variety of forms. The final product in this project was a physical photobook consisting of printed photographs that could be presented to individuals who actively seek out information that could aid in the assessment of the Honors culture. Though this method of presenting the findings of this study was effective, it is important to recognize that the current generation is one heavily dependent on technology and the ability to quickly obtain and share information through social media outlets. It is proposed that for continued research on this topic, a similar technique be performed to obtain information regarding the status of the Honors College community and that this information be shared using various media outlets to include Facebook, Instagram, and an internet blogs. This expansion of the project would highlight the best avenues for sharing this information with members of a community. The Humans of New York project would not be as successful as it is without its platform of social networking sites. Uncovering which of these social networking mediums is most effective in providing relevant information to the Honors College community would be highly useful for the future of this project within the Honors College.

Another topic for future research that unexpectedly arose in this project was perception of culture over time. Comparison of the experiences of graduated Honors College alumni currently working for the Honors College as faculty members and previously as students could serve an interesting metric to observe cultural shifts within the community over time.



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