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“It’s never going to be perfect even though I want it to be”:
Quantitatively and qualitatively investigating honors and non-honors students’ experiences of
perfectionism and related variables

By

Julie Anne Hartung

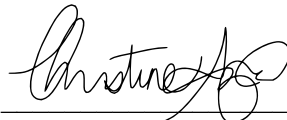
An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
University Honors Scholars Program
Honors College
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Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that students in university honors programs may be distinct from their non-honors counterparts. To further examine these differences and the overall experiences of honors students, this thesis utilized a Study 1/Study 2 mixed methodology design to examine the experiences of honors students within East Tennessee State University's University Honors Scholars program. Study One quantitatively examined the differences between honors and non-honors students' levels of perfectionism, imposter syndrome, and academic and social competitiveness. Findings from Study One inspired Study Two, which qualitatively examined honors students' experiences with perfectionism, uncovering the sources and effects of their perfectionistic behaviors. Combined, these findings indicate that not only do honors students experience higher levels of perfectionism than non-honors students, likely stemming from the expectations and standards held by the honors program, but also that their perfectionistic behaviors are overall maladaptive and are used to avoid failure rather than in the pursuit of success.

Keywords: perfectionism, imposter syndrome, honors, non-honors, quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods

Introduction

Honors students are a unique population on university campuses, with students varying not only from the general study body but also within the programs themselves (Achterberg, 2005; Brimeyer et al., 2014; Cross et. al., 2018; Kaczinsky, 2007; Miller and Dumford, 2018; Shushok, 2006). Due to this wide variety of experiences, it can be difficult to fully determine what sets honors students apart from other students (Achterberg, 2005). This thesis was focused on identifying how honors students may differ from non-honors students in terms of their experiences with perfectionism, imposter syndrome, student-student rapport, academic and social competitiveness, and student social support. To do so, the researcher conducted a two-part mixed method study to investigate honors students at a specific regional university.

Study One consisted of a quantitative examination of the differences between honors and non-honors students regarding perfectionism, imposter syndrome, and academic and social competition. Both perfectionism (i.e., striving to meet high standards while generally fearing failure; Frost et. al., 1990; Hewitt et. al., 1989) and imposter syndrome (i.e., feelings of fraudulence based in an inability to internalize success; Clance & Imes, 1978) have previously been found in higher levels in honors students than in non-honors students, indicating that similar differences could be present at ETSU. In addition, the study tested academic and social competitiveness, the internal conflict between one's desire for academic success and social success (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). Due to the increased rigor of honors programs, it was hypothesized that honors students may place more emphasis on academic achievement than non-honors students, even to the detriment of their social lives. Study One additionally examined the influences of honors students' student-student rapport levels and student social support on these variables in an attempt to determine why any potential differences may be occurring.

Informed by the results of Study One, Study Two consisted of a qualitative study to further examine honors students' experiences with and perceptions of perfectionism. Using thematic analysis and previously established dimensions of perfectionism as sensitizing concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bowen, 2019), the study revealed the sources and effects of student's perfectionism.

Study One

Honors Students

The National College Honors Council, the national level organization for honors programs and colleges, states that an honors education is characterized by classes and extracurriculars that are significantly deeper and more complex than those typically found at universities (NCHC, 2021). Further, they claim that the honors experience should include a student-focused environment while providing opportunities that are designed to fit with the university's culture and aims within a close community between the students and faculty (NCHC, 2021). These qualities allow for a wide variety of honors programs and requirements across the nation, meaning that identifying empirically what makes an honors student different from a non-honors student can be difficult.

Despite this difficulty, an examination of literature found that honors students generally tended to have higher grades than their non-honors counterparts, indicating that there is something about being an honors student that sets an individual apart from the general student population (Achterberg, 2005). Subsequent findings from Shushok (2006), Miller and Dumford (2018), Kaczinsky (2007), and Brimeyer et al. (2014) support this idea. When compared to non-honors students of similar qualifications, honors students are 2.5 times more likely to meet with

faculty members in their office hours, 3.1 times more likely to discuss career paths and vocational aspirations with faculty members, and 2.5 times more likely to discuss social concerns, political issues, or world events with another student outside of class often or very often than their non-honors peers (Shushok, 2006). This increased level of engagement is further supported by findings from Miller and Dumford (2018), who found that being in an honors program had a positive impact on various aspects of student engagement depending on one's year in school. First-year students had an increased level of participation in activities that required reflective and integrative learning, learning strategies, and collaborative learning while also experiencing more frequent interactions with diverse others and faculty (Miller & Dumford, 2018). In contrast, senior students were only positively affected in their interactions with faculty, with honors seniors reporting more interactions than non-honors seniors (Miller & Dumford, 2018). When completing the College Student Inventory portion of the Noel-Levitz Retention Management System, honors students were found to score higher in intellectual interests, desire to finish college, and positive attitudes towards instructors (Kaczinsky, 2007). Additionally, while honors students were found to far outscore non-honors students in their levels of academic confidence (i.e., perceptions of one's ability to perform well in school, especially on tests), they fell short of their non-honors peers in terms of sociability (i.e., the general inclination to join in social activities) (Kaczinsky, 2007). Brimever et. al. (2014) found that non-honors students were generally more concerned with their grades than honors students, while honors students were more concerned with what they learned in their classes than their grades. Furthermore, honors students reported feeling less academically entitled than non-honors students, being less likely to feel entitled to good grades for minimal work, less likely to believe that professors should be

available when it is convenient for the student, and less likely to have negative feelings towards faculty members when they miss meetings or do not respond promptly (Brimever et. al., 2014).

In addition to differences between honors and non-honors students, previous research has uncovered differences among honors students, as there is no homogeneity among all honors students due to varying university standards (Achterberg, 2005). This heterogeneity was further supported by Cross et. al. (2018), who found that honors students can fall into five different personality profiles based upon their levels of agreeableness, extroversion, neuroticism, openness to experiences, conscientiousness, as determined by their responses to the Big Five Inventory measure. For example, *pleasant traditionalists* are agreeable, emotionally stable, have a low openness to new experience, and are introverted and conscientious; *laid back students* are the least conscientious but are also emotionally stable, open minded, and agreeable; *serious students* are highly conscientious, introverted, and mildly disagreeable and neurotic but are also extremely open-minded; *typical friendly* students are the most extraverted and agreeable and are highly conscientious, emotionally stable, and open-minded; and *possible misfits* are the most neurotic, least agreeable, and less conscientious and open-minded than their peers (Cross et. al., 2018). Honors students fell into every one of these personality types, meaning that there is a large amount of variation between the students within honors programs.

In addition to illustrating the variety found within honors program, Cross et. al. (2018) also found that students can differ in their levels of other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism as well as suicidal ideation depending on their personality type (Cross et. al., 2018). Honors students who were labeled *serious students* had the highest expectations for their own level of perfection and for others' perfection and the second highest level of concern that others' expected perfection from them, indicating that these students not only tend to expect

perfection from themselves and others but also that they perceive others as having that same expectation (Cross et. al, 2018). In contrast, those who were labeled as *possible misfits* and *laid back students* had the lowest expectations for their own level of perfection among honors students; additionally, *laid back students* also had the lowest expectations for others' perfection and *possible misfits* had the most concern for others' expectation of their perfection (Cross et. al, 2018). These three types of honors student were also those who reported experiencing suicidal ideation at the highest rates, with *possible misfits* reporting the most frequently followed by *serious students* and *laid back students* (Cross et. al., 2018). Essentially, not only do different "profiles" of an honors student exist, but depending on the student's "profile," they may experience different forms of pressure from different sources.

Based on Cross et. al.'s (2018) findings, more research is needed into students' negative experiences with perfectionism as students may feel pressure to be perfect from different sources and may also be affected differently by that experience of perfectionism depending on what type of honors student they are. To this end, this study also offers a response to Achterberg's (2005) call for more empirical research on honors students' differences by extending research on honors and non-honors students' experiences of perfectionism. Additionally, this thesis examines the closely related phenomenon of imposter syndrome (Dudău, 2014) as well as the social experiences of these students in regards to social and academic competitiveness, student-student rapport, and social support. However, since the requirements and expectations for honors programs vary from university to university, research into these experiences must be constrained to the students of only one program to ensure that the experience remains consistent. With that in mind, this research focuses solely on students attending East Tennessee State University.

Though ETSU currently has five honors programs (i.e., University Honors Scholars -- now Global Citizens Scholars, Midway Honors Scholars, Honors-in-Discipline, Changemaker, and Fine & Performing Arts), the varying requirements and expectations between the programs necessitates further limiting the scope of this research to the University Honors Scholars program. In the process of completing this thesis, the program was changed to the Global Citizens Scholars and new standards were adopted, though the current students within the program will go unaffected by this change. As such, for clarity, this thesis will refer to the program as the University Honors Scholars (UHS).

The University Honors Scholars program is a four-year program open to entering freshman applicants that is targeted towards students who want an interdisciplinary approach to their general education as well as their chosen field, which can include any major offered at ETSU (ETSU, 2019). Positions are offered on a competitive basis through an application that requires a minimum 29 ACT and 3.5 on a 4.0 scale high school GPA and examines the student's curriculum, resume, recommendation letters, and personal essay (ETSU, 2019). Twenty-two applicants are accepted each year, providing a full scholarship package that includes tuition, most fees, the costs associated with a standard residence hall and meal plan, and an honors stipend for four years so long as the student remains in good standing (ETSU, 2019). This means that a student must maintain a certain GPA as determined by their semester in school (i.e., 2.75 in the first semester, 3.00 in the second, 3.15 in the third, and 3.25 in the fourth and subsequent semesters) or be placed on probation, followed by losing their scholarship and eventually being dismissed from the program if their GPA does not rise above the requirement (ETSU, 2021b). Students are also required to complete specific courses that include: eight credits of an honors colloquium course, a year-long literature and philosophy seminar, four honors exclusive courses

(a fine art course, a sophomore science seminar, a social science course, and a literature course), 12 honors electives within the student's major or minor, an honors foundations of research course to prepare for thesis hours, and 6 credits of thesis hours culminating in the completion of an undergraduate honors thesis, required for graduation with honors (ETSU, 2019).

Although honors programs are meant to celebrate and challenge high-achieving students, the pressure to maintain a high GPA in intense classes has the potential to create additional stress beyond that which college students already face. This pressure to achieve may also be tied to one's feelings of perfectionism; Speirs Neumeister (2004) found that gifted college students in honors programs felt pressure not only to succeed for themselves but also because they feared failure and felt consistently compared to their high-achieving honors peers. The established link between honors programs and perfectionism seems to suggest that honors programs not only attract but foster perfectionist tendencies in students (Cross et al., 2018; Rice, Leever, Christopher, & Porter, 2006; Speirs Neumeister, 2004). Given the association between honors students' experiences of perfectionism and mental health (Cross et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2006) and academic performance (Rice et al., 2006), further study into honors' students experiences with perfectionism is warranted. To this end, this thesis focused on these students' experiences with perfectionism and a related concept, imposter syndrome (Dudău, 2014).

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is an aspect of personality generally characterized by holding and striving for high personal standards and experiencing a high level of concern over mistakes (Frost et. al., 1990; Hewitt et. al., 1989). It is frequently examined through a combined focus on the source and effect of perfectionism. In terms of the source of perfectionism, research generally recognizes three sources of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism, caused by one's expectations for

oneself; other-oriented perfectionism regarding one's expectations for others' performance; and socially prescribed perfectionism, based on one's perception of others' expectations for their performance (Cross et. al., 2018; Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Regarding effects, perfectionism is commonly divided into two aspects based on effect: adaptive perfectionism for the positive and maladaptive perfectionism for the negative. Though both forms are generally characterized by similar traits, adaptive perfectionism is considered as a healthy and positive form of perfectionism, as the traits of perfectionism are used to achieve high-level goals in order to obtain positive consequences, meaning that they are driven by the positive reinforcement that comes from achieving high standards and often being rewarding for that success (Slade & Owens, 1998). In contrast, in maladaptive perfectionism, termed neurotic perfectionism in earlier research, those traits are directed at the achievements of high-level goals in order to avoid negative consequences, meaning that these perfectionists are driven by the negative reinforcement that comes from negative outcomes (Slade & Owens, 1998). Most simply, adaptive perfectionists use perfectionistic behaviors out of a desire for success, while maladaptive perfectionists adopt the behaviors out of a fear of failure (Slade & Owens, 1998).

In the context of Study 1 of this thesis, examining the effects of maladaptive and adaptive perfectionism is of greater importance than the perfectionism's source due to the fact that either adaptive or maladaptive perfectionism has the potential to significantly impact the lives and experiences of undergraduate students. Maladaptive perfectionism has been connected to experiences of burnout. Hill and Curran (2016) found that perfectionist concerns -whose traits are more closely associated with maladaptive perfectionism - such as one's concern over making mistakes, fear of others' negative perceptions, perceived difference between expectations and performance, and negative reactions to imperfection, were significantly related to experiencing

overall burnout and all of the symptoms of burnout (i.e., reduced personal accomplishment, depersonalization, exhaustion). However, perfectionistic strivings – traits of perfectionism that are associated with self-oriented motivations for perfection and setting high performance standards and which generally align more so with adaptive perfectionism- were found to buffer against the effects of perfectionistic concerns, being negatively associated with overall burnout, reduced personal accomplishment, and devaluation (Hill & Curran, 2016). This indicates that students who experience only maladaptive perfection may be more prone to developing burnout than those who experience both the maladaptive and adaptive forms, as adaptive perfectionism could help to protect them from the negative influence of perfectionistic concerns. Maladaptive perfectionism in the form of perfectionistic concerns also has also been found to be connected to the development of depression through maladaptive perfectionists' tendency to engage in maladaptive rumination rather than adaptive rumination (Di Schiena et. al., 2012). This means that instead of focusing on events in terms of concrete and sensory based details, individuals engaging in maladaptive perfectionism tend to focus on the meanings and potential implications of the event, with this tendency being found to be connected to the development of depressive symptoms (Di Schiena et. al., 2012). However, this does not mean that adaptive perfection cannot cause students harm, as both types of perfectionism have been found to be related to experiences of depression, anxiety, stress, and test anxiety (Bieling et. al., 2004).

In addition to negative psychological outcomes, perfectionism has also been linked to imposter syndrome - an individual's perception that their achievements are due to fraud, luck, or chance rather than personal merit (Dudău, 2014; Thompson et. al., 2000). According to Dudău (2014), imposter syndrome is strongly correlated to three of four self-evaluative dimensions of perfectionism as identified by Hill et. al. (2004, as cited in Dudău, 2014) - specifically concern

over mistakes, need for approval, and rumination. This means that as an individual experiences increased levels of imposter syndrome, they also tend to experience an increased tendency to seek approval from others, have heightened sensitivity to and concern over their mistakes, ruminate more frequently about their performance, and resent any pressure to succeed for parental approval (Dudău, 2014). This increased sensitivity to mistakes is further supported through findings from Thompson et al. (2000), which also concluded that those experiencing imposter syndrome had significantly lower global self-esteem scores than those who do not. Though perfectionism and imposter syndrome can be experienced by all students, the increased prevalence of perfectionism in honors students (Cross et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2006; Speirs Neumeister, 2004) may suggest that imposter syndrome will also be more pronounced for students in honors programs.

Imposter Syndrome

The imposter phenomenon, alternatively termed perceived fraudulence or imposter syndrome is typically characterized by an individual's strong feelings of intellectual and/or professional fraudulence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Despite objective success, individuals experiencing imposter syndrome do not internalize their success, instead attributing it to some factor other than their personal skills (Clance & Imes, 1978). Though initial studies within clinical settings found high achieving women to be the most predominately and intensely impacted by imposter syndrome, further non-clinical research has found that the phenomenon is more widespread than previously thought. In fact, an estimated 70% of people will experience imposter syndrome at least once in their lives, giving support to Harvey's (1981 as cited in Saluki & Alexander, 2011) belief that anyone can perceive themselves as an imposter if they fail to internalize their success (Matthews & Clance, 1985 as cited by Gravois, 2007).

According to Clance (1985), imposters are marked by at least two of six potential characteristics: the imposter cycle, a need to be special or the best, Superman/Superwoman aspects, a fear of failure, a denial of competence or discounting praise, and feelings of fear and guilt about their success. Of these, the imposter cycle can be the most influential in maintaining one's imposter syndrome. The cycle consists of 6 phases, beginning when an individual receives an achievement-related task. The task causes feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and worry in the individual, leading to one of two responses: over-preparation or procrastination. Accomplishing the task, regardless of response, leads to a feeling of relief. However, the success generally also leads to positive feedback which the individual will then discount, feeling that their success was not due to their innate talents but rather hard work in the case of the over-preparation response or luck if the individual procrastinated. Discounting the positive feedback results in further feelings of fraudulence, and the cycle begins anew when the individual receives another achievement-related task.

This cycle parallels with the cyclical academic process found within university life. Students receive a series of achievement-based tasks within their classes (e.g., papers, projects, exams) that can result in positive feedback in the form of positive comments or good grades. As such, for university students who experience imposter syndrome, the beginning of the imposter cycle is near unavoidable. This has the potential to make escaping from the cycle difficult, making it even more likely that these students will experience the negative academic effects of imposter syndrome. This could be particularly true for honors students, as the academic standards, required courses, and thesis project provide increased opportunities for the assignment of achievement-based tasks, thereby increasing the likelihood of becoming trapped within the cycle. For example, as part of their course requirements, University Honors Scholars must enroll

in a colloquium course each year. Though the projects and assignments change to better reflect what students are generally preparing for in each year, (e.g., freshmen focus on exploring career options and what it takes to succeed in their fields of interest, sophomores perform a job market analysis and are expected to become more involved in leadership roles, juniors are introduced to and practice research practices for the undergraduate thesis, and seniors focus on preparing their theses), each year receives multiple achievement-based tasks that they are expected to complete in addition to the typical tasks assigned in their other courses, which thereby increases their opportunities to begin the imposter cycle (ETSU, 2020).

Existing research has already identified that college students experience imposter syndrome; more importantly, however, the imposter phenomenon has been linked to experiences of burnout and self-sabotage in students (Villwock et. al., 2016; Cowman & Ferrari, 2002). Experiencing imposter syndrome is significantly related to the experience of various components of burnout, such as exhaustion, cynicism, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalization (Villwock et. al., 2016). This means that as students experience higher levels of imposter syndrome, they are more likely to become burnt out, which can be detrimental for students' mental states. Those who experience burnout tend to not only be emotionally exhausted and detached from themselves but also generally have lower self-esteem when it comes to their academic performance, perceiving their performance more negatively even if their actual performance does not change (Villwock et. al., 2016; Garden, 1991). In the case of self-sabotage, students who experience imposter syndrome tend to partake in behavioral self-handicapping at a higher rate than those who do not. This means that in order to avoid negative outcomes being associated with their work, these students will sabotage their performance in some way so that any potential

negative outcome can be attributed to the handicap and not themselves (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002).

The potential negative effects of imposter syndrome can be even more likely for honors students, as recent findings from Lee et. al. (2020) show that honors students are more likely than their non-honors peers to experience imposter syndrome. In addition, these findings align with others that have examined the increased prevalence of perfectionism in honors students (Cross et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2006; Speirs Neumeister, 2004) and extend the established connection between imposter syndrome and perfectionism (Dudău, 2014; Thompson et. al., 2000), as honors students also experienced higher levels of self-oriented perfectionism than non-honors students (Lee et. al., 2020). Given the recency of these findings, this thesis seeks to determine if a similar pattern is present at ETSU through the following hypotheses:

H1: Honors students will report experiencing perfectionism at higher rates than non-honors students.

H2: Honors students will report experiencing imposter syndrome at higher rates than non-honors students.

Perfectionism and imposter syndrome are important individual characteristics are more likely to be present in honors students than in non-honors students, but these aspects represent on a small part of the student experience. It is likely that students differ in how they relate to others both inside and outside of the classroom, and as such, the following section of this thesis discusses three variables of interest in student relationships: student-student rapport, academic and social competitiveness, and social support.

Rapport

Rapport -- a sense of understanding and connection built amongst individuals within various environments (Jorgenson, 1992) -- is an aspect of interpersonal relationships that is frequently examined in a variety of contexts. Of particular interest in this research is the rapport developed between students within classrooms, referred to as student-student rapport. This type of rapport is argued to be associated with positive academic outcomes (Dwyer, 2004), with student-student rapport found to positively relate to students' amount of participation in class and their perceptions of classroom connectedness – students' perceptions of a supportive and connected educational environment (Frisby & Martin, 2010). This means that students who experience high levels of rapport with their classmates were both more likely to perceive their class as a supportive, connected environment and more likely to participate in that environment, indicating that this type of rapport can have positive effects on students' educational experiences.

For this thesis, student-student rapport is interesting because honors students at ETSU appear to have an increased opportunity to form rapport with one another compared to non-honors students in a majority of programs. The UHS program not only requires students to take specific courses closed to those not within the honors college, such as the various options for the honors literature course, but also courses specific to the UHS cohort year, such as Quest for Meaning and Values (the freshman literature and philosophy seminar) and the Honors Colloquium course taken each semester (ETSU, 2019). This means that honors students will frequently have classes with the same individuals, giving more opportunities to build rapport among classmates than non-honors students typically receive. To examine the potential influence this may have on the levels of student-student rapport experienced by each group, the following hypothesis was posed:

H3: Honors students will perceive more student-student rapport than non-honors students.

Academic and Social Competitiveness

Another relational characteristic of interest for honors students is the potential conflict between student's goals for academic and social success, referred to as academic and social competitiveness. Essentially, a student's desire for social success can be in competition with their desire to do well in school, both for themselves and for others, as it can be more socially advantageous to not perform as well as one could (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). Academic and social competitiveness is a concept used to understand the dynamics that shape classrooms in regards to students' academic goals and desire for social success (Sutton & Keogh, 2000). Specifically, the singular scale created to measure the phenomenon examines the two components that interact to form this competition: School Conscientiousness and Desire for Social Success. In some cases, students will choose to sacrifice their academic goals in favor of social success, while in others the student will choose a lower level of social success in order to meet their academic goals (Sutton & Keogh, 2000).

Initially studied in school-aged children, the scale has not been used to examine a college-aged or even adult population. However, research indicates that part of how students define being successful in college is based in their level of social integration with their university (Yazedjian et. al., 2008). Attempting to maintain a healthy work-life balance between their coursework and lives outside of school can be difficult for students, particularly if they are unable to maintain that balance. The lower a student's work-life balance, the more likely they are to experience stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Sprung & Rogers, 2020).

While these difficulties are faced by all students, research on those in honors programs supports the idea that they may experience greater levels of tension between their academic and social goals. These students tend to score more highly in intellectual interests and academic confidence (Kaczinsky, 2007) and value knowledge gained over their grades (Brimever et. al., 2014). At the same time, honors students are required to maintain a certain GPA (ETSU, 2021b) and tend to have lower scores in sociability when compared to their non-honors counterparts (Kaczinsky, 2007). In combination, these characteristics suggest that honors students are more likely to prioritize their academic success over social connections. Due to the lack of research on this conflict in the context of college-aged students, the following research question is posed:

RQ1: How do undergraduate students in honors and non-honors programs experience academic and social competition?

In particular, honors students' apparent increased attention on academics and lowered scores in sociability suggest that academics could be winning the competition against the desire for social success, which could have the potential for negative effects on their levels of rapport as they focus more on academic success than social, rapport building opportunities (Achterberg, 2005; Brimever et. al., 2014; Kaczinsky, 2007). To examine the potential existence of academic and social competition in undergraduate students, the following hypothesis was posed:

H4: Honors students' levels of academic and social competitiveness will be negatively correlated with student-student rapport.

Social Support

Social support refers to behaviors that indicate a responsiveness to another's needs, such as acts that communicate caring, validate the others' worth, feelings, or actions, or assistance in

copied by providing resources or assistance (Cutrona, 1996 as cited in Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). Though similar to rapport, social support is distinct in that refers directly to the behaviors that individuals perform to communicate support rather than a sense of connection and understanding (Cutrona, 1996 as cited in Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Jorgenson, 1992). Within an academic context, the phenomenon is generally characterized as the support that students experience from their peers, parents, instructors, and school at large (Malecki & Elliot, 1999; Danielsen et. al., 2009). Generally studied within the context of K-12 school children, aspects of school-based social support have been found to have generally positive impacts on those students, such as teacher support being strongly related to students' satisfaction with school (Danielsen et. al., 2009) and students in middle and high school students who experienced support from their friends, parents, and teachers having a wide variety of benefits, such as better attendance and having higher school satisfaction, engagement, and better grades (Rosenfeld et. al., 2000).

In college-aged populations, general social support has been found to affect both students' mental health and potential to experience burnout. Findings from Hefner and Eisenberg (2009) indicate the students with low quality social support were more likely to experience depressive symptoms, anxiety, suicidal ideation. In contrast, students who indicated a perceived higher level of social support were less likely to experience depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or an eating disorder (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). This suggests that social support can not only have a positive effect on students' mental health but also that the absence of support can have detrimental impacts. Regarding burnout, social support - particularly that from friends - was found to have a buffering effect on burnout, with students who had low levels of social support having high levels of burnout (Jacobs & Dodd, 2003). Given that university settings still provide

many of the relationship dynamics found within K-12 education (e.g., student-instructor, student-student, student-school body), it appears likely that college students could be benefiting from both general social support and the same type of school-based social support found within K-12 environments.

This form of social support appears to connect well with the previously discussed student-student rapport, as both examine students' perceptions of supportive and connected relationships (Dwyer, 2004). As such, honors students' comparatively increased opportunities for close relationships with individuals at their university have the potential to positively affect both their experience school-based social support and rapport building opportunities. In particular, honors students' repeated classes with the same classmates, the presence of honors exclusive courses taught by faculty affiliated with the honors college – who are often in frequent contact with honors students – and increased opportunities to work closely with faculty across the university indicate that these students may have an even greater opportunity for social support from their classmates and the university as a whole than their non-honors peers. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H5: Honors students' levels of social support from classmates and student-student rapport will be positively correlated.

However, it is currently unclear how honors students' increased opportunities to gain social support from their academic environment will impact their experiences of imposter syndrome, leading to the following research question:

RQ2: How are honors students' levels of social support from their classmates related to their experience of imposter syndrome?

Method

Participants

Participants were 55 undergraduate students (31 female, 14 male, 1 transgender male, 1 nonbinary individual, and 8 unknown) enrolled at East Tennessee State University. Thirty-one participants were in the University Honors Scholars program and 21 were not. Honors students were primarily female ($n = 31$, male = 6, non-binary = 1, unknown = 3) and included freshmen ($n = 7$), sophomores ($n = 9$), juniors ($n = 6$), and seniors ($n = 12$). Non-honors students were also predominately female ($n = 10$, male = 8, transgender male = 1, unknown = 4) and included only freshmen ($n = 12$), sophomores ($n = 7$), and juniors ($n = 4$).

Procedures

After receiving IRB approval, participants were recruited via email; University Honors Scholars (UHS) were contacted by the Director of Honors and Midway Scholars and non-honors students were contacted by the course professor of one of two introductory level social science courses that fulfill a general education requirement at ETSU. Students in the honors section were eligible to participate if they were (a) at least 18 years of age and (b) were enrolled in the University Honors Scholars program at ETSU. Students in the non-honors section were eligible to participate if they were (a) at least 18 years of age and (b) enrolled at ETSU but not in any honors program.

The solicitation email contained a brief description of the study, the inclusion criteria, and a note regarding the confidentiality of the participants' information. Interested individuals were directed via a link in the email to an online questionnaire using Qualtrics, where they viewed the consent form (See Appendix A). After indicating consent, participants were asked to

indicate if they were a member of any honors program at ETSU and if yes, which program. Students who indicated that they were enrolled in any honors program other than the University Honors Scholars program were removed from the survey and shown a message thanking them for their interest. Students who indicated that they were enrolled in either (a) the UHS program or (b) no honors program proceeded to the survey (see Appendix B).

Measures

Perfectionism was measured using Rice and Preusser's (2002) Adaptive/Maladaptive Perfectionism Scale, which consists of 27 items. Though developed using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*really unlike me*) to 4 (*really like me*), this thesis utilizes a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*nothing like me*) to 7 (*exactly like me*) in order to gain a more detailed understanding of participants' experiences with perfectionism. This scale consists of four subscales: *sensitivity to mistakes* (e.g., the negative emotions associated with making mistakes), *contingent self-esteem* (e.g., feelings and self-evaluations associated with one's performance), *compulsiveness* (e.g., preferences for organization and a deliberate/careful orientation towards tasks), and *need for admiration* (e.g., a need for approval and potential narcissistic aspirations). Rice and Preusser reported internal reliability for *sensitivity to mistakes* ($\alpha = .90$), *contingent self-esteem* ($\alpha = .73$), *compulsiveness* ($\alpha = .75$), and *need for admiration* ($\alpha = .81$). Though the reported Cronbach's alpha scores were lower for *self-esteem* and *compulsiveness* than for the remaining two subscales, both were above the threshold for reliability. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for each subscale in this thesis were $\alpha = .88$, $\alpha = .84$, $\alpha = .71$, and $\alpha = .84$, for *sensitivity to mistakes*, *contingent self-esteem*, *compulsiveness*, and *need for admiration*, respectively.

Imposter Syndrome was measured using the Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (1985). The 20-item measure utilizes a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*). An individual's experience of imposter syndrome is calculated by summing the items, with higher scores indicating more frequent and more intense experiences. A score of 40 or less means few characteristics of imposter syndrome, between 41 and 60 indicates moderate experiences with imposter feelings, between 61 to 80 indicates frequent feelings of being an imposter, and any score higher than 80 means that the individual often has intense experiences with imposter syndrome. Lee et. al. (2020) reported an internal reliability of $\alpha = .91$. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for this thesis was $\alpha = .92$.

Student-Student Rapport was measured through a modified version of Gremler and Gwinner's (2000) 11-item measure of rapport, adapted by Frisby and Martin to measure student-student rapport. The scale consists of 11 items on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Frisby and Martin (2010) reported an internal reliability score of .94; internal reliability for this thesis was $\alpha = .96$.

Academic and Social Competitiveness was measured by Sutton and Keogh's (2000) 14-item Social and Academic Competition Scale (SACS). Though the measure was developed on a 4-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), this thesis adopted a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to better understand the levels of conflict students may be experiencing. The measure includes two subscales: *school conscientiousness* (e.g., items regarding the desire to do well in school for oneself and others) and *desire for social success* (e.g., items relating to social power or success). Sutton and Keogh reported an internal reliability of $\alpha = .63$ for *school conscientiousness* and $\alpha = .61$ for *desire for*

social success. Internal reliability for this thesis was $\alpha = .60$ for school conscientiousness and $\alpha = .34$ for desire for social success.

School-Based Social Support was measured through a modified version of Malecki, Demaray, and Elliott's (2000) Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale. Though the original measure included subscales for *parents, teachers, classmates, a close friend, and people in the school*, the version adopted for this study only includes the subscales pertaining to classmates, as this thesis is most interested in how support may differ due to the presence of an honors cohort within the honors college. To this end, honors students were directed to answer questions pertaining to classmates with an honors exclusive course in mind, while non-honors participants were told to focus on the course from which they were recruited. Reliabilities in the CASSS Manual (2019) range from .91-.96 for *classmates*; for this thesis, internal reliability was $\alpha = .93$ for *classmates*.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that honors students would report higher rates of perfectionism than non-honors students and was partially supported by the results of an independent samples *t*-test. Of the four subscales of perfectionism, results indicated that there were no significant group differences between honors and non-honors students in terms of *need for admiration* ($t(49) = -.92, p = .37$) and *sensitivity to mistakes* ($t(49) = 1.08, p = .28$). However, there were significant differences between students regarding their *compulsiveness* ($t(49) = -2.44, p < .05$) and *contingent self-esteem* ($t(49) = -2.68, p < .01$). An examination of the means for *compulsiveness* indicated that honors students ($m = 5.22, sd = .96$) experienced higher levels of compulsiveness than non-honors students ($m = 4.48, sd = 1.21$). Likewise, an examination of the means for

contingent self-esteem revealed that honors students ($m = 5.62, sd = .84$) also experienced higher levels of *contingent self-esteem* than their non-honors peers ($m = 4.90, sd = 1.08$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that honors students would experience higher levels of imposter syndrome than non-honors students. Results of an independent samples *t*-test did not support this hypothesis ($t(52) = -1.30, p = .20$), indicating that there were no significant differences between the level of imposter syndrome experienced by honors students ($m = 71.52, sd = 13.85$) and that experienced by non-honors students ($m = 66.09, sd = 16.78$).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that honors students would perceive more student-student rapport among their classmates than non-honors students. This was supported by the results of an independent samples *t*-test ($t(47) = -3.88, p < .001$), with an examination of the means finding that honors students ($m = 5.29, sd = 1.30$) perceived higher levels of student-student rapport than non-honors students ($m = 3.93, sd = 1.13$).

The first research question asked how undergraduate students in both honors and non-honors programs experience academic and social competitiveness. To answer this question, first an independent samples *t*-test was run to determine if there were significant differences between honors and non-honors students' experiences with both aspects of academic and social competition, *school conscientiousness* and *desire for social success*. Results of this *t*-test found that there were no significant differences between students for either *school conscientiousness* ($t(48) = -1.89, p = .07$) or *desire for social success* ($t(35.81) = 1.27, p = .21$). The lack of significant differences between groups led to the question of which of the two aspects in competition are "winning" for undergraduate students overall. To answer this question, a paired samples *t*-test was run to determine whether students as a whole experienced higher levels of *school conscientiousness* or a *desire for social success*. Results of the paired samples *t*-test ($t(49)$

= 14.26, $p < .001$) indicated significant differences between undergraduate students' levels of *school conscientiousness* and a *desire for social success*. An examination of the means showed that undergraduate students experienced higher levels of *school conscientiousness* ($M = 5.15$, $SD = .97$) than a *desire for social success* ($M = 2.48$, $SD = .71$).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that honors students' levels of academic and social competition would be negatively correlated with their levels of student-student rapport. Results of a Pearson correlation did not support this hypothesis, indicating that there was not a significant relationship between students' rapport with their classmates and either their *school conscientiousness* ($r = .21$, $p = .29$) or their *desire for social success* ($r = -.08$, $p = .68$).

The second research question asked how honors students' levels of social support from their classmates were related to their experience of imposter syndrome. Results of a Pearson correlation indicate that there was no significant relationship, positive or negative, between imposter syndrome and social support from classmates ($r = .08$, $p = .71$).

Hypothesis 5 predicted that honors students' levels of social support from their classmates would be positively correlated with their levels of student-student rapport. This predication was supported by the results of a Pearson correlation ($r = .69$, $p < .001$), which indicates that there is a significant positive relationship between the level of social support that honors students perceive from their classmates and the level of student-student rapport that they experience.

Study 1 Discussion

Generally, honors and non-honors seemed to experience both imposter syndrome and the two dimensions of academic and social competitiveness at the same rates, while honors students

experience student-student rapport and two dimensions of perfectionism at higher rates than non-honors students.

A potential reason for the lack of differences between honors and non-honors populations in imposter syndrome could be the fact that the phenomenon is by no means exclusive to one type of experience. There is wide variety of students across college campuses, both within honors programs (Cross et. al., 2018) and in the general university population (Taylor et. al., 2020). In fact, university campuses are currently the most diverse they have ever been according to a recent report published through the American Council on Education (2020). Additionally, student diversity is an advertised characteristic of ETSU (Taylor et. al., 2020; ETSU, 2021a), indicating that variety among the student body in terms of experiences and backgrounds is encouraged. As approximately 70% of people are likely to develop imposter syndrome at some point in their lives (Matthews & Clance, 1985 as cited by Gravois, 2007) and the phenomenon has already been documented to occur in a variety of undergraduate students (Parkman, 2016), it follows that the diversity within a university population would likely result in many different types of individuals experiencing imposter syndrome, regardless of their status within an honors program.

The lack of similar significant differences between honors and non-honors students' levels of imposter syndrome was surprising given the connection between individual's experiences of both imposter syndrome and perfectionism established in previous literature (Dudău, 2014; Thompson et. al., 2000). However, consistent with previous research on honors students, Study One found that UHS students experienced higher levels of perfectionism than non-honors students; specifically, honors students reported experiencing *compulsiveness* and *contingent self-esteem* aspects of perfectionism more frequently than their non-honors

counterparts. This means that honors students were more likely to have a preference for organization and be deliberate towards tasks and experience their feelings and self-evaluations being tied their performance than non-honors students, though both groups were similarly sensitive to mistakes and have a similar desire for approval and admiration from others. These findings indicate that while there is not something unique about being an honors student that results in high levels of imposter syndrome, there is perhaps something that is inspiring higher levels of perfectionism in honors students than in the non-honors population. To further examine how being in the University Honors Scholars program affects students' experiences with perfectionism, a second study was conducted.

Study Two

Perfectionism is frequently studied quantitatively in terms of its various sources and effects (Cross et. al., 2018; Slade & Owens, 1998), but current literature is missing an in-depth exploration of how honors students actually experience perfectionism in their day-to-day lives. Study Two utilized a qualitative design to probe the perceptions and experiences of honors students as they pertain to perfectionism, exploring the potential sources and effects of students' perfectionism, informed in part by the various dimensions discussed in Study 1 (e.g., self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism; adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism). Performing qualitative research on this topic provides opportunities that quantitative research does not, primarily the opportunity to engage in "thick descriptions" of participants' experiences (Ponterotto, 2006). "Thick descriptions" allow for a more nuanced understanding of the context of a participant's experiences, describing it in full and contextualizing it (Ponterotto, 2006). In the case of perfectionism, this grants the opportunity to better understand students' experiences and perceptions of their perfectionism, an understanding

that cannot be reached through a quantitative scale measuring whether their perfectionism is adaptive or maladaptive or whether the source is rooted in the self, others, or social prescription.

Method

Participants

Participants were six undergraduate students (4 female, 2 male) within the University Honors Scholars Program, aged 18 to 21 years old. Participants included two freshmen, three juniors, and one senior, and – including the mandatory honors colloquium course – had taken between two and 12 honors courses ($M=7$).

Procedure

After receiving IRB approval, the Director of Honors and Midway Scholars sent a solicitation email to all current UHS students. Interested students contacted the researcher to schedule an interview. Interviews were structured, meaning that all participants were asked the same questions in the same order, which ensured consistency across responses (Williamson, 2018). This consistency allows for an increased ease in analyzing and comparing participants' responses (Williamson, 2018). Additionally, structured interviews allow researchers to ask more complex questions than could be posed in a survey format while also providing participants with a greater motivation to provide higher quality responses due to the fact that researchers can provide the interviewee with clarification and explanation as needed (Williamson, 2018). Due to the shorter timeframe associated with an undergraduate thesis, information on students' experiences with perfectionism need to be collected and analyzed as quickly as possible while also ensuring as much detail as possible. To that end, a structured interview format provides high

quality detail unattainable through surveys in an easily comparable form, which is ideal for Study 2 (see Appendix C).

All interviews were conducted via Zoom in the winter of 2020-2021. Prior to the interview, participants were sent a copy of the consent form to examine and keep for their personal records (see Appendix D). Then, consent was obtained verbally at the beginning of the interview through the interviewer verbally explaining the research process, participant expectations, and participants' rights before asking for clear consent from the participant to both be recorded and to be included in Study 2. Interviews ranged from 12 to 39 minutes in length ($M = 21$ minutes) and were audio-recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed, resulting in 36 pages of single-spaced text. To ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned a number according to the order in which their interview occurred, and all recordings were deleted from both personal devices and Zoom once transcription was completed. Transcriptions were stored in a password protected file on a USB flash drive devoted solely to this purpose. The file was only opened on a password protected personal laptop in non-public spaces to further protect the contents of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which is a method of analysis used to identify, analyze, and report themes in a given dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes capture something important about the data set, describing a common pattern that relates to the questions posed by researchers, thereby providing a means of organizing and describing the data in detail while also allowing for deeper interpretations of what is identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary benefit of this form of analysis is its flexibility. Since it does not have to be tied to any particular theoretical framework, thematic analysis can be applied in a variety of ways, including

an inductive approach to coding or a deductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the context of this study, thematic analysis was conducted following a more deductive approach, coding in response to the specific research question of how honors students are experiencing perfectionism (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Though this form of analysis does not grant the most detailed description of the data overall, it provides a deeper analysis of the aspect of interest (i.e., perfectionism), thereby making it ideal for specifically examining how honors students are experiencing perfectionism (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis consists of six steps. The first step is to familiarize oneself with the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To do so, the researcher transcribed the interviews and read through them multiple times, making notes regarding commonalities among the data set. Step two is to generate initial codes, coding systematically for interesting and relevant features (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher first printed the transcripts and assigned a specific color for previously noted commonalities (e.g., light blue for mentions of pressures/expectations, peach for descriptions of perfectionistic behaviors) before re-reading the transcripts and highlighting examples of the identified commonalities. The third step in conducting a thematic analysis is to develop potential themes and gather data relevant to each (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this step, the researcher used previously established aspects of perfectionism (i.e., self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed sources; adaptive and maladaptive effects), as sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2019), identifying if and how the current emerging themes may have aligned with those dimensions, then compiling evidence for those connections in the form of participant quotes. The fourth step of thematic analysis is to review the identified themes, determining if they are representative of the data set; the fifth step involves defining and naming the themes by refining what is addressed in each (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fourth and fifth steps were

conducted in combination, with the previously identified themes being reviewed to ensure that they pertained directly to perfectionism and to specify how they did. The sixth and final step of thematic analysis is to report one's findings, utilizing compelling and detailed examples from participants to support the analysis and conclusions given (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results for this study are presented in the following section.

Results

When asked about their experiences with perfectionism, University Honors Scholars' experiences centered on two themes: their perceptions of the source of their perfectionism and the effects that perfectionism had on their lives.

Sources of Perfectionism

As University Honors Scholars explained their experiences, they tended to focus on the sources of their perfectionism, describing the reasons or factors that led to them feeling as though they had to achieve a high standard of performance. The sources that students identified appear to align with the dimensions of perfectionism described by Hewitt and Flett (1991): self-oriented, other-oriented, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Self-oriented perfectionism (i.e., perfectionistic behaviors that are motivated by a desire to achieve one's personal high standards for success; Cross et. al., 2018) was particularly prominent among UHS students, who tended to identify their personal high standards for performance as the root of their perfectionism. Students' responses also seemed to coincide with the dimension of socially prescribed perfectionism – perfectionism rooted in the perceived expectations of perfection from others (Cross et. al., 2018) – in that students' perceptions of expectations and standards for performance held by the honors college caused them to engage in perfectionistic behaviors. Finally, students

perceived the performance of others within the program, both currently and previously, as a motivator for their perfectionistic performance, aligning with the dimension of other-oriented perfectionism in which an individual's perfectionistic behaviors are rooted in the level of performance they perceive others as achieving (Cross et. al., 2018).

Honors students perceived themselves as feeling most affected by the characteristics of self-oriented perfectionism, identifying their own personal high standards and desire to do well as the primary motivators behind their perfectionistic behaviors. When discussing perfectionistic tendencies, participants tended to identify their own standards without being asked. For example, one student mentioned that they felt their coursework need “to be the best I can possibly make it” (P2), while another mentioned they have “almost a need to produce work that is acceptable by my own standards” (P1). The self-oriented nature of this participant's perfectionistic behaviors is evident in that they identified their own standards as being “higher than other people's” (P1). The desire to achieve one's personal high standards for performance is key to the conception of self-oriented perfectionism, indicating that this is one source of perfectionistic behaviors for students within UHS.

Consistent with the characteristics of socially prescribed perfectionism (Cross et. al., 2018), honors students frequently identified pressures and expectations from the program to perform well and achieve in a variety of ways as motivators for their perfectionism. Participants directly cited characteristics of the UHS program that they felt distinguished them from the general student body at ETSU. For example, Participant 6 succinctly summarized honors students' unique pressures as “Grades, but beyond that, everything;” however, they further explained that “we have to do research, we have to write a thesis, we have to take this many credit hours, we need to do this, we need to be involved in this. There's a pressure to do so much

more and that's part of being an honors student." According to participants, these expectations lead them to work harder than they perhaps would have otherwise, "because they [honors students] feel like they almost have to" because of a perceived "expectation for honors students to be better performers." (P2). For one participant, the "next level expectation that's even above, like, regular college courses" found in honors classes caused them to "almost feel like a hamster on a wheel, like working and working and working, and I don't know if I'm, like, getting anywhere" even as they believed that "I'm trying my best" (P3). Here, the constant drive to achieve stemmed from the expectation that students will both achieve and maintain a certain level of performance, resulting in students feeling as though they must constantly be working to meet those standards, even if they do not personally perceive themselves as reaching it. In addition to feeling a pressure to achieve perfection due to the direct requirements of being an honors student, Participant 1 mentioned that "I think there are a lot of unspoken expectations ... to build our resume up, to have, you know, involved ourselves in community service beyond the point of what collo [honors colloquium course] makes us do, to have done research, to have gotten involved in something we're interested in, to have become well-rounded individuals, which isn't written into our standards ... for us, specifically, I think the pressure to be a well-rounded individual is greater for us than it is for a lot of other students." These students' responses suggest that some of the sources of perfectionism stemmed from the honors program itself, through its explicit and implicit expectations and standards for students' achievements.

In addition to feeling pressure from the requirements of the UHS program, participants also felt an implicit pressure to meet the standards of performance achieved by both current and previous honors students, which aligns with the characteristics of other-oriented perfectionism (i.e., perfectionistic behaviors enacted in order to achieve the same level of performance that one

perceives others as achieving; Cross et. al., 2018). For example, Participant 4 said that “being in the honors program ... pushes you to do better and work harder” primarily because “you’re around a lot of people too in the program that, they go above and beyond, they’re amazing, I’m always amazed when I’m talking to them, like they’re, all the honors kids that I know are really hardworking and dedicated,” indicating that honors students may feel pressure to achieve more because they perceive other honors students as doing similarly. This was echoed by Participant 5, who stated that “you know that your peers are probably doing pretty well because they’re also in an honors program and so you feel like you have to keep up with that.” In addition to feeling a pressure to keep up with their honors peers, UHS students perceived an expectation to uphold previously set standards of honors performance due to the “legacy left behind us from past classes and other students” (P3). Not only did students feel a pressure to be perfect in order live up to the standards of other honors students, but they also felt this pressure from their professors as well, especially if the professor had taught honors courses previously. As one participant explained “they’ve taught all these years in a row and they have like an expectation and a standard that these other students lived up to” (P3). The pressure students felt to maintain the same level of performance as they perceived others’ achieving both in the present and in the past is in line with the motivations found in other-oriented perfectionism, as students are engaging in perfectionistic behaviors in an effort to keep up with the level of achievement that they perceive others were obtaining (Cross et. al., 2018).

Though students identified feeling pressure from their personal standards, the honors program’s expectations, and their perceptions of the performance of others to engage in perfectionistic behaviors, they did not perceive each source of perfectionism as equally impactful. Specifically, while honors students felt that the standards and expectations associated

with being an honors student impacted their behaviors, they viewed their own standards as overall more influential on their experience of perfectionism.

While they acknowledged that their personal standards often exceed what is required of them, students felt that these personal motivations and the pressure they placed upon themselves was stronger than the expectations that others have for them. For example, one participant said that “I probably put more pressure on myself than other people put on me” (P5), while another said that when completing assignments, they “want it to be perfect” rather than just being able to “complete something and get it done and turn it in, and ... probably, you know, get a fine grade because I would hit all the check boxes” (P4). Regarding the expectations of the honors college, the general consensus among students was that while they did feel an added pressure from the honors program, “the honors expectations aren't as stressful because I already hold myself to a standard at least as high as the one the honors program sets for us” (P1) and “most of any pressure that’s put on me is put there by myself, not as much from the program” (P5). This stance was further supported when Participant 6 discussed which standards caused them the most concern, stating that “it's usually I'm more worried about meeting my own standards than I am the honors program standards, so it doesn't affect me a whole lot” before clarifying, “I think trying to meet every expectation that you set for yourself is definitely, for me at least, much more strenuous than meeting the standards set forth by the program.” This emphasis on motivation rooted in personal standards over the expectations of others indicates that while students are affected by all three sources of perfectionism, they perceive self-oriented perfectionism as having the greatest influence over their lives.

Effects of Perfectionism

When discussing their experiences with perfectionism, honors students also highlighted the various effects that their perfectionistic tendencies had on their lives. These effects appear to coincide most strongly with the categories of effects found in maladaptive perfectionism - perfectionistic tendencies being used to avoid negative consequences and commonly associated with more negative behaviors and effects (Slade & Owens, 1998).

First, participants explained how the expectations of the honors college led to perfectionistic tendencies that they perceived as harmful in some way. As Participant 1 described the pressures associated with being in the honors program, they explained that “these pressures can have detrimental impacts on students;” they clarified that, “if we feel like we’ve fallen short of those expectations, that can cause us to be a lot of things. Sad, depressed, angry at ourselves, very critical. It can put us in a dark place, if we don’t meet those expectations” (P1). In addition, students’ perfectionistic tendencies sometimes interfered with their ability to complete assignments; Participant 4 said that being a perfectionist “can bring more stress and make me dread certain coursework,” while another remarked that their perfectionism caused them to “dread” projects because “knowing that I’m going to want to try to make it as good as it can be” is time-consuming and frustrating (P3). This sentiment that was echoed by participant 6, who believed that “a lot of people [perfectionists], myself included, feel pressure to do everything correctly so, I may be tired or I may not want to do something, but someone's asked me to do something outside of just schoolwork and I don't- I'm tired, I want to go sleep, but I agreed to do it... and I'm going to do it right, instead ... doing it in 10 minutes and going to sleep, I'm going to spend an hour and I'm going to do it right.” The negative impacts of perfectionism on coursework may even lead students to procrastinate to avoid the stress they feel from attempting

to complete various assignments to their standards. As Participant 6 states, “I’m gonna have to spend so much time doing it right, but I’m like, when I start this, I’m going to do it right, but I don’t want to start it, I don’t want to have to sit here and do it right so, it can make me a procrastinator personally.”

Furthermore, striving to achieve their personal standards can sometimes have detrimental effects on students’ emotional states, as not being able to achieve the standards they have set for themselves often leads to feelings of disappointment in their performance, even if they have performed well. As Participant 3 stated, “For me, it’s always a kind of a feeling of frustration at the fact that it’s never going to be perfect even though I want it to be, and like, knowing that I’m never going to reach that standard. Like, disappointment, I guess, in myself, even though I’m doing the best that I can, I’m still disappointed with the end result”. Students’ perfectionistic tendencies caused them to feel worn down as they attempt to achieve the high standards that they and the program set. In describing the pressure to maintain their own high standards, Participant 6 used the word “crushing;” this participant then continued to describe the effect of that effort as something that can “wear said student out over time, or for the day, or for the week” (P6). Thus, the negative effects of student’s perfectionistic tendencies can impact both their feelings and actions towards coursework and their overall emotional states; this seems consistent with Slade and Owens’ (1998) characterization of maladaptive perfectionism as a form of perfectionism that has an overall negative impact on multiple aspects of an individual’s life.

As indicated through these statements, honors students primarily experience negative effects from their engagement with perfectionistic behaviors, usually those rooted in the expectations of the honors college. Their perfectionism caused students to experience feelings of dread regarding their coursework, procrastination, and more negative emotional states,

negatively affecting their lives in ways that align more so with maladaptive effects than with adaptive effects. In fact, the lack of identifiable positive effects of perfectionism on students' lives indicates that perhaps students' pursuit of perfection in their academic work is overall more harmful than beneficial.

Study 2 Summary

Honors students' descriptions of their perfectionism aligned with the previously established sources of perfectionism: self-oriented, socially prescribed, and other-oriented (Cross et. al., 2018). Students felt pressure from their own standards as well as the expectations of the honors program and how they perceived others as performing to engage in perfectionistic behaviors in order to achieve and maintain a certain level of success. Though students felt pressure from all three of these sources, they identified their personal standards as being the most impactful on their lives. However, despite this perception, honors students commonly discussed the negative effects they experienced from the perfectionistic behaviors they engaged in to meet the standards of the program, indicating that perhaps students' perceptions and their lived reality are somehow unaligned. Additionally, while students identified negative impacts of their perfectionism, they did not discuss any positive effects, meaning that their perfectionistic behaviors could be doing students more harm than good.

Discussion

This thesis consisted of a two-part mixed method design. In Study One, quantitative methods were applied to examine the differences between honors and non-honors students, specifically to determine if differences existed in their experiences of imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and related variables of academic and social competitiveness, student-student

rapport, and student social support. Though no differences were found in students' levels of imposter syndrome, honors and non-honors students differed in two aspects of perfectionism: *compulsiveness* and *contingent self-esteem*. These differences inspired a deeper examination of honors students' experiences with perfectionism in Study 2, which utilized qualitative means to gain a more detailed understanding of how honors students understand and experience perfectionism.

Overall, Study 1 revealed that honors and non-honors students at ETSU are more similar than different in terms of their experiences with imposter syndrome and academic and social competition. Both groups of students experienced relatively high levels of imposter syndrome ($m_{\text{UHS}} = 71.52$, $m_{\text{general}} = 66.09$), falling within the range that Clance (1985) identified as "frequent" feelings of imposter syndrome and indicating that students at ETSU, regardless of honors status, are experiencing high levels of imposter syndrome. The similarities between honors and non-honors students' levels of imposter syndrome are inconsistent with Lee et al.'s (2020)'s study, which found that honors students experienced more imposter syndrome than did students in the general population; however, these results begin to make sense when taken together with the students' scores on academic and social competitiveness. Both groups of students experienced higher levels of school conscientiousness ($m_{\text{UHS}} = 5.37$, $m_{\text{general}} = 4.86$) than a desire for social success ($m_{\text{UHS}} = 2.38$, $m_{\text{general}} = 2.64$). In addition, imposter syndrome was significantly correlated with school conscientiousness ($r = .50$, $p < .001$) but not desire for social success ($r = .14$, $p = .35$). Regardless of their status in an honors program or not, students who wanted to do well in school also seem to suffer from a perception that their work is not good enough.

Although previous research has found that students perceive social interaction to be an important part of their university experience (Yazedijan et al., 2008), students at ETSU appeared to be more concerned with doing well in school and obtaining their degrees than with being popular or engaging in social activities. As a regional university with small average class sizes and a weaker focus on common social events such as sporting events (ETSU University Profile), ETSU may attract students who are generally more focused on their academic success regardless of honors status while students who are more interested in social activities and connections are attracted to larger flagship schools nearby such as the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. However, the results of this study suggest that students who want to do well in their classes may feel undeserving when they do achieve; given that some estimates of the prevalence of imposter syndrome are as high as 70% (Matthews & Clance, 1985 as cited by Gravois, 2007), it is unsurprising that both groups of students scored in the range of “frequently” experiencing this phenomenon, especially for students at an academically focused university.

However, Study 1 *did* uncover differences between honors and non-honors students’ experiences with perfectionism. Given previously established connection between imposter syndrome and perfectionism (Dudău, 2014; Thompson et. al., 2000), this difference initially appeared surprising; however, an examination of the two concepts may help explain why differences emerged in participants’ experiences of perfectionism but not imposter syndrome. While imposter syndrome refers to students’ feelings of fraudulence and an inability to internalize their success (Clance & Imes, 1978), perfectionism is characterized by striving to achieve high standards (Frost et. al., 1990; Hewitt et. al., 1989). This means that while both groups felt that they did not deserve their successes, honors students experienced this perception of fraud in addition to feeling an increased pressure to perform. The difference in honors and

non-honors students' levels of perfectionism was significant, indicating that although being an honors student was not indicative of an increased likelihood to experience imposter syndrome, it was associated with the potential to experience higher levels of certain aspects of perfectionism.

Interestingly, perfectionism was correlated with different dimensions of perfectionism for the different groups of students. Non-honors students who experienced imposter syndrome were more likely to feel that their perfectionistic tendencies emerged as sensitivity to mistakes ($r = .55, p < .01$) and a need to be admired ($r = .59, p < .01$); however, honors students who experienced imposter syndrome felt that their perfectionism was also evident in their sensitivity to mistakes ($r = .70, p < .001$), their need for admiration ($r = .41, p < .05$), but their self-reported contingent self-esteem was *inversely* related to imposter syndrome ($r = -.47, p < .05$). Contingent self-esteem is a dimension of perfectionism that encapsulates how students' self-worth is tied to their success on tasks (Rice & Preusser, 2002); for honors students, those whose feel more fraudulent are less likely to feel that their achievement is a determining factor in their self-esteem, possibly as a defensive mechanism for students in an extremely competitive program. For those not in the competitive honors program, feeling fraudulent or undeserving of praise had no association with how they perceived self-esteem and achievement. In combination, these results suggest that something unique is occurring in the context of honors students' experiences of perfectionism.

Study 2 found that a likely culprit of honors students' perfectionism is that students who are attracted to honors programs may already be experiencing perfectionistic tendencies. Though honors students commonly discussed the perfectionism they experienced as due to the expectations and standards of the honors program, they perceived their personal standards as having a greater impact on their use of perfectionistic behaviors than the honors program's

expectations. This personal pressure is consistent with what previous researchers have identified as self-oriented perfectionism – one’s own high standards of performance (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). The importance that students placed on their self-oriented perfectionism indicates that honors students may have been experiencing perfectionism before joining the honors college. The program’s expectations and the pressure to keep up with the performance of current and previous honors students then exaggerated those already present behaviors, as students potentially feel both constantly compared to their high-achieving peers and a pressure to succeed out of a fear of failing those standards – characteristics that have previously been associated with students in honors programs (Spiers Neumeister, 2004).

Despite previous assertions that perfectionism can have both positive and negative effects (Slade & Owens, 1998), students in this thesis focused solely on the negative effects of their perfectionism, which seems consistent with *maladaptive*, or neurotic, perfectionism. This type of perfectionism is rooted in a fear of failure and negative consequences, and UHS students in this thesis identified negative consequences such as being removed from the program or being considered not as good as other honors students. Thus, these students felt that their perfectionistic tendencies did not serve to help them produce higher quality work, but instead were almost interferences – some participants noted that their perfectionism made projects more difficult or led them to procrastinate.

It may seem unusual that a high-achieving group of students would not perceive perfectionism as adaptive, given that scholars have conceptualized adaptive perfectionism as a focus on submitting high-quality work and attaining one’s goals. These characteristics are likely to be expected in honors students, and indeed previous research supports the idea of both forms of perfectionism in honors populations (Cross et al., 2018). However, the students in this thesis

cited the requirements of the Honors College itself as their motivation to perform well and to produce excellent work; each student felt that the increased workload, higher expectations, and presence of other honors students in the UHS program were sufficient to prompt them to do their best work. Students were already striving to achieve the standards of the honors college and felt that perfectionistic tendencies only served to add additional pressure. Thus, any potential positive motivations of perfectionism were overshadowed by the motivations already inherent in the UHS program.

A potential limitation in Study One is the relatively small percentage of University Honors Scholars represented within the sample. There are typically approximately 100 UHS students at ETSU, meaning that the sample represented only around a quarter of all UHS students. In Study Two, a particular limitation is the self-select nature of the data collection process. Interested participants chose to contact the researcher, indicating that there could be something unique about those individuals that motivated them to participate. For example, perfectionism could be particularly problematic for these participants or they could wish to assist a fellow University Honors Scholar. As such, it is possible that these students are not representative of honors students' experiences with perfectionism. With that in mind, the purpose of this thesis was not to generalize the experiences of honors students but rather to provide an idea of how these students are experiencing perfectionism.

Given the inconsistencies between Lee et. al.'s (2020) findings regarding the differences between honors and non-honors students' levels of imposter syndrome and the current thesis results, future research should examine these populations experiences further to better understand their potential similarities and differences and they may affect them. In addition, future research could explore the effects of perfectionism more thoroughly; researchers may want to further

probe the negative effects that participants in this thesis encountered, or specifically address potential positive effects in an attempt to learn why those were not present for this population. Regardless, there is much to be learned about perfectionistic tendencies in honors populations.

Summary

Given the previously established differences between honors and non-honors students, this thesis examined the two groups' experiences in terms of their levels of perfectionism, imposter syndrome, and relationships with other students (e.g., student-student rapport, academic and social competitiveness, and student social support). Then, the thesis explored honors students' experiences with perfectionism to determine its sources and effects.

Study One quantitatively examined the experiences of honors and non-honors students to determine how the two populations differed. Students were found to not differ significantly in their levels of imposter syndrome and academic and social competitiveness, with both populations frequently experiencing feelings of fraudulence and their school conscientiousness taking precedence over their desire for social success. However, honors and non-honors students did differ significantly in two aspects of perfectionism (i.e., *compulsiveness* and *contingent self-esteem*), with honors students experiencing each at higher levels than their non-honors peers.

These differences inspired Study Two, which qualitatively examined honors students' experiences with perfectionism in order to better understand what why honors student reported these higher levels of perfectionism. Thematic analysis revealed that the source of students' perfectionism was generally a combination of their personal standards, the expectations of the honors college, and their perceptions of the level of performance of other honors students, aligning with the previously established sources of perfectionism – self-oriented, socially

prescribed, and other-oriented, respectively. Students generally perceived their perfectionism as having negative effects on their lives, indicating that students' higher levels of perfectionism are perhaps more so out of a need to avoid failing to meet the expectations of themselves and others rather than in pursuit of positive outcomes.

These findings indicate that not only do honors students experience higher levels of perfectionism than their non-honors counterparts, but also that this could be due to the standards held by the program and students' desire to meet them. Given that students perceived their perfectionism to have overall negative effects on their lives, these findings could be important moving forward for honors programs at ETSU seeking to better their student's quality of life, specifically the newly developed Global Citizens Scholars program that is replacing the UHS program, by illustrating how too much pressure to achieve a certain standard of performance could have detrimental effects on student's overall lives.

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Appendix A

Study 1 Informed Consent Form

Principal Investigator's Contact Information: (email) hartung@etsu.edu

Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (office) 423-439-8108 (email) anzurc@etsu.edu

Organization of Principal Investigator: East Tennessee State University

INFORMED CONSENT

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to voluntarily participate.

A. Purpose: This research study is about learning how imposter syndrome impacts honors students and their relationships with other honors students. We also want to understand the differences between honors and non-honors students. This will help us reach a better understanding of the experiences and struggles of honors students.

B. Duration: One survey taking approximately 15 minutes.

C. Procedures: You are asked to complete one survey. The survey will be administered online. During the survey, you will be asked questions about your experiences as a student. Questions will address the emotions and perceptions you have regarding different academic situations. All responses will be recorded, but no identifying information will be collected.

D. Possible Risks/Discomforts: There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study. The survey will ask you about your experiences with imposter syndrome and within your classes, which we anticipate will cause minimal distress. However, you have the right to pause, reschedule, or discontinue the survey at any time. You can also pass on a question or remove yourself entirely from the study.

E. Possible Benefits to Participant: You may not receive a benefit.

F. Possible Benefits to Society: The study will benefit society by furthering understanding and knowledge of the impacts of imposter syndrome and the differences being within an honors program may have on students' experiences. Additionally, future students may benefit through the advanced societal understanding of imposter syndrome and the differences between honors and non-honors students.

G. Financial Costs: There are no costs associated with participating in the study.

H. Compensation in the Form of Payments to Participant: You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

I. Voluntary Participation: Taking part in this research is voluntary. **You can choose to not take part in it.** You can pass on any question. You can pause, reschedule, or discontinue the survey at any time.

J. Contact for Questions:

a. Primary:

- i.** Julie Hartung (hartung@etsu.edu)
- ii.** Dr. Christine Anzur (423-439-8108)

b. Secondary

- i.** IRB Coordinators (423-439-6055) or (423-439-6002)

c. Questions about your rights

- i.** Chairperson of the ETSU Institutional Review Board (423-439-6054)

K. Confidentiality: We will try our best to keep your information secret. After this research is finished, ETSU is required to keep a copy of everything for at least 6 years. The results may be published and/or presented at meetings, but your name will not be used. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, myself, my research team, and the ETSU IRB have access to the study records.

By selecting "I agree", I confirm that I have read and understand this Informed Consent Document and that I had the opportunity to have it explained to me verbally via phone call. I attest that I am an adult, above the age of 18, and currently enrolled full-time at East Tennessee State University. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions and that all my questions have been answered. By selecting "I agree", I confirm that I voluntarily choose to take part in this research study.

Appendix B

Study 1 Survey

To which category do you belong?

- Non-honors
- University Honors Scholar
- Midway Honors Scholar
- Honors in Discipline
- Fine and Performing Arts
- Presidential Honors Community Service Scholar

Please select your gender and year in school (based on number of years, not credit hours)

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Freshman | <input type="checkbox"/> Male | <input type="checkbox"/> Nonbinary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sophomore | <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender Male | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Junior | <input type="checkbox"/> Female | <input type="checkbox"/> Other |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Senior | <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender Female | |

Please indicate the extent to which the following statements are true of you as a student.

	Not very true at all	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very true
I have often succeeded on a test or task even though I was afraid that I would not do well before I undertook the task.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can give the impression that I'm more competent than I really am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I avoid evaluations if possible and have a dread of others evaluating me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When people praise me for something I've accomplished, I'm afraid I won't be able to live up to their expectations of me in the future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I sometimes think I've obtained my present position or gained my present success because I happened to be in the right place at the right time or knew the right people.

I'm afraid people important to me may find out that I'm not as capable as they think I am.

I tend to remember the incidents in which I have not done my best more than those times I have done my best.

Not very true at all Rarely Sometimes Often Very true

I rarely do a project or task as well as I'd like to do it.

Sometimes I feel or believe that my success in my life or in my job has been the result of some kind of error.

It's hard for me to accept compliments or praise about my intelligence or accomplishments.

At times, I feel my success has been due to some kind of luck.

I'm disappointed at times in my present accomplishments and think I should have accomplished more.

Sometimes I'm afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack.

I'm often afraid that I may fail at a new assignment or undertaking even though I generally do well at what I attempt.

Appendix C

Study 2 Interview Schedule

Before we begin, I need to gain your consent to participate in the study. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the experiences honors students at ETSU have with perfectionism. You're being asked to participate in one 15 to 30 minute interview in which you will be asked questions pertaining to this goal. There are no financial costs or compensation included in this project, and there are no foreseeable risks associated with participating. You may not receive a direct benefit from your participation, but your information could be beneficial in allowing us to learn more about how honors students experience perfectionism, which could be used to benefit future students. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, meaning that you can choose not to take part in it and may pass on any question or quit the interview entirely at any time. This interview is currently being recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. Your information will be kept as confidentially as possible, with any identifiers being removed from the transcript and the recording being deleted as soon as transcription is complete, but it is entirely your decision if you would like to be recorded or not. Is it ok for me to keep recording? [wait for yes or no] Ok, thank you for letting me know. After hearing about the study and what you are expected to do, do you still consent to participate in this research?

1. So first, can you tell me how old you are and what program you're a part of?
 - a. What year are you in?
 - b. How many honors courses have you taken?
 - c. Did you take a survey from me this past spring about imposter syndrome?
2. So, what is perfectionism to you? Can you define it for me?
 - a. Guiding Q: What actions/behaviors/attitudes do you associate with it and perfectionists?
3. Would you describe yourself as a perfectionist? Why/why not?
 - a. Maybe ask if they answer 'no': Would you be surprised if someone else described you as one?
4. How do you think being/not being a perfectionist impacts your attitude and approach towards your coursework?
 - a. What about being an honors student?
 - b. Which do you think has the biggest impact, your status as an honors student or perfectionism?
5. What pressures do you think honors students have that non-honors students don't experience?
 - a. What impact do those pressures have on your coursework?
 - i. How about outside of school?
6. Is there anything else you think people should know about dealing with perfectionism as an honors student or about being honors in general?

That concludes our interview then, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me! If you have any questions or decide you want your data removed, don't hesitate to contact me through my email address. Thanks again, and I hope you have a great day!

Appendix D

Study 2 Consent Form

Principal Investigator's Contact Information: (email) hartung@etsu.edu

Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (office) 423-439-8108 (email) anzurc@etsu.edu

Organization of Principal Investigator: East Tennessee State University

INFORMED CONSENT

This Informed Consent will explain about being a participant in a research study. It is important that you read this material carefully and then decide if you wish to voluntarily participate.

A. Purpose: The purpose of this study is to further examine findings from research done in Spring 2020 focusing on honors students. Specifically, the current research seeks to examine how perfectionism is experienced by honors students.

B. Duration: One interview taking approximately 15 to 30 minutes.

C. Procedures: You are asked to complete one interview. The interview will be conducted over Zoom. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences as an honors student. Questions will address the emotions and perceptions you have regarding different academic situations. All responses will be recorded, and minimal identifying information (name, email, honors program, year in school, and age) will be collected.

D. Possible Risks/Discomforts: There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. The survey will ask you about your experiences with perfectionism, which we anticipate will not cause any distress. However, there is a slight risk that confidentiality could be broken and your participation in the study become known, though steps have been taken to mitigate this risk. However, you have the right to pause, reschedule, or discontinue the interview at any time. You can also pass on a question or remove yourself entirely from the study.

E. Possible Benefits to Participant: You may not receive a benefit.

F. Possible Benefits to Society: The study will benefit society by furthering understanding and knowledge of the experiences of honors students and the effects of perfectionism.

G. Financial Costs: There are no costs associated with participating in the study.

H. Compensation in the Form of Payments to Participant: You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

I. Disclosure: This study is being done as part of the honors undergraduate thesis, required for all honors students to graduate. As such, the interview will be conducted by Julie Hartung, PI and University Honors Scholar.

J. Voluntary Participation: Taking part in this research is voluntary. **You can choose to not take part in it.** You can pass on any question. You can pause, reschedule, or discontinue the survey at any time.

K. Contact for Questions: If you have any questions or research-related problems at any time, you may contact Julie Hartung at (931) 636-4094 or hartung@etsu.edu, or Dr. Christine Anzur at (423) 439-8108 or anzurc@etsu.edu. This research is being overseen by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies. You may also contact the ETSU IRB at (423) 439-6054 or irb@estu.edu for any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant.

L. Confidentiality: We will try our best to keep your information secret. A number will be assigned to the transcript of your interview. After this research is finished, ETSU is required to keep a copy of everything for at least 6 years. The results may be published and/or presented at meetings, but your name will not be used. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, myself, my research team, and the ETSU IRB have access to the study records.
