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## Academic Stress and Honors Students: A Phenomenological Study of Christian High School Students' Perceptions and Experiences

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# Academic Stress and Honors Students: A Phenomenological Study of Christian High School Students' Perceptions and Experiences

## Abstract

This research study sought to explore high school students' perceptions and experiences with academic stress related to advanced/honors courses. The participants were 115 advanced/honors students in a private Christian high school in New Jersey, who responded to an anonymous survey about their perceived stressors and the impact of academic-related stress on their lives. In the second phase of the study, eight students participated in interviews in which they responded to questions related to the causes and impact of academic stress on their overall physical and social-emotional well-being. The results of the survey and interviews clearly showed the pervasive academic pressures on advanced/honors students and the competitive nature of high school culture. The qualitative data highlighted the need for Christian high schools to reassess their goals and practices for advanced/honors programs.

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Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

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High School Students' Perceptions and Experiences

by

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B.A. in Secondary Education, Calvin College, 1992

Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt University  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
April 2020

Academic Stress and Honors Students: A Phenomenological Study of Christian  
High School Students' Perceptions and Experiences

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**Abstract**

This research study sought to explore high school students' perceptions and experiences with academic stress related to advanced/honors courses. The participants were 115 advanced/honors students in a private Christian high school in New Jersey, who responded to an anonymous survey about their perceived stressors and the impact of academic-related stress on their lives. In the second phase of the study, eight students participated in interviews in which they responded to questions related to the causes and impact of academic stress on their overall physical and social-emotional well-being. The results of the survey and interviews clearly showed the pervasive academic pressures on advanced/honors students and the competitive nature of high school culture. The qualitative data highlighted the need for Christian high schools to reassess their goals and practices for advanced/honors programs.

*Keywords:* academic stress, advanced/honors students, social-emotional, high school culture

High schools strive to train and equip students for academic and personal achievement, offering teenagers a wide variety of curricular programs in pursuit of those goals. In preparing 21st century students for their future, many American high schools have embraced the college-for-all mentality, in which the focus of secondary school curricula is on “college readiness.” Indeed, American educational culture has steered teenagers to accept this version of success, recommending high-achieving students enroll in advanced/honors classes during high school. Ponnuru (2019) discussed the current emphasis on preparation for college: “In the model we have held out, young people will finish high school, enroll in college, receive a degree, and then begin careers that require college diplomas.” In this cultural context, teenagers are feeling the pressure from high schools, parents, and peers to pursue academic achievement for the goal of gaining admission to college.

As the objective of high school education has become more focused on college preparation, advanced/honors programs are increasing in the number of course offerings and students who participate. Founded in 1957, the AP (Advanced Placement) program was intended to offer college-level, rigorous classes to high-achieving students at elite private and public schools. In recent decades, AP courses and exams “serve an equally important role as a signal in college admissions” (Klopfenstein & Thomas, 2009, p. 873). The huge increase of AP and dual-credit courses offered in public and private high schools has intensified this educational goal. In the U.S., more high school students than ever before are taking college-level and advanced/honors courses. The College Board, which operates the AP program, reported that roughly 2.8 million students took at least one AP exam in 2018, with over 22,000 high schools participating (College Board, 2019).

The academic achievement race for advanced/honors high school students is continuing to escalate, with the ultimate prize as admission to a top-tier college or university. Financial concerns may be one reason why parents push their students to take college-level advanced courses. As college tuition costs in the U.S. have skyrocketed in recent decades, there may be increasing academic pressure for students to work harder in high school to achieve opportunities for scholarships and to earn college credits (Digby, 2016, p. 31). Abeles (2015) described the intense competition for students to succeed academically in the following manner:

This illness is the Race to Nowhere. Its source is an education culture gone crazy with competition, and a society so obsessed with one narrow vision of success that it's making our children sick. Once contained to ambitious adult professionals, the sickness now afflicts children, who absorb the message that sprinting for the 'top' is the only way to succeed. (p. xiii)

As a result of academic expectations and pressures, teenagers' stress and anxiety levels have increased markedly. In hopes of gaining a competitive advantage, some honors/advanced high school students are experiencing chronic levels of stress that potentially are impacting their physical and mental health. Academic-induced stress can be excessive and debilitating for teens, especially harmful during their adolescent formative years (Leonard et al., 2015).

The persistent and increased academic stressors for advanced/honors students to perform at the highest levels may be exacting a heavy toll on teens' social-emotional well-being and development. Vatterott (2019) commented, "This relentless focus on [academic] achievement crowds out the important psychological needs of teens. For those teachers and administrators who are sensitive to it, they see a general malaise, an emptiness that exists in the hearts and souls

of too many teens today” (p. 13). Harvard University’s dean of admissions also noted distinct challenges for 21st century students:

The fact remains that there is something very different about growing up today. Some students and families are suffering from the frenetic pace, while others are coping but enjoying their lives less than they would like. Even those who are doing extraordinarily well, the ‘happy warriors’ of today’s ultra-competitive landscape, are in danger of emerging a bit less human as they try to keep up with what may be increasingly unrealistic expectations. (Fitzsimmons, McGrath, & Ducey, 2017)

The frantic race for admission to prestigious colleges and universities may be stressing out high school students and potentially damaging teenagers’ overall physical and mental well-being.

The immense growth of AP and dual-credit curricular programs has sparked serious discussion and examination of students’ stress and anxiety levels. While some stress can be viewed as healthy for cognitive development, high levels of stress and anxiety for students can be detrimental to adolescents’ physiological and psychological well-being. The American Psychological Association’s Stress in America survey in 2014 revealed that teens’ stress levels during the school year far exceeded what students believed to be healthy and were consistent with adults’ average stress levels (Bethune, 2014). Furthermore, teenagers reported that school was their main stressor, along with concerns about getting into a good college/university and deciding what to do after high school. These findings are concerning to high schools and parents alike, as teenagers reported academic-related issues as significant and unhealthy causes of stress (American Psychological Association, 2014).

The culture of American high schools has been described as a “pressure cooker,” one in which advanced/honors students typically experience excessive workloads, crammed class

schedules, and increased academic competition with peers. Vatterott (2019) described an education culture “that wrongly equates rigor with workload and that values achievement at all costs. In many high-achieving schools, parents and teachers often believe everything they are doing is justified as a means to an end” (p. 12). Indeed, the norm for advanced/honors students includes increased and potentially detrimental anxiety and stress levels. In pursuit of the all-important GPA, class rank, and test scores, high school students, along with parents, teachers, and administrators, have reoriented the priorities for schools to demonstrate academic rigor and success. Thus, in the context of increased stress and anxiety levels for students, one might investigate what this phenomenon looks like in a private Christian high school setting.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceived causes and impact of academic stress on high school students in advanced/honors courses. As a qualitative study, the focus was on the perceptions and experiences of advanced/honors high school students. In addition, this study examined the culture of a private Christian high school and its emphasis on promoting honors/advanced courses in its curricular programs.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following questions, based on the perceptions and experiences of high school students in advanced/honors courses:

1. In what ways do high school advanced/honors courses contribute to students’ academic stress?
2. What effects does an advanced/honors course load have on high school students’ social-emotional health and overall well-being?

3. How does private Christian high school culture promote advanced/honors programs in its curricular offerings?

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. The definitions are the work of the researcher, unless otherwise noted.

*Academic Stress*: a specific classification of stress related to school and academic demands placed on students. Specifically, “High-stakes learning and performance situations can put a counterproductive stress on students” (Beilock, 2011).

*Advanced/Honors*: high school curricular programs that are considered to be more academically challenging, rigorous, and prestigious. In many high schools, AP and dual-credit courses are considered to be advanced/honors level.

*AP (Advanced Placement)*: a program operated by the College Board that “gives students the chance to tackle college-level work while they're still in high school and earn college credit and placement” (College Board, n.d.). Students take an AP exam at the end of the school year in order to potentially earn college credits.

*Dual-Credit/Dual-Enrollment*: courses that are typically considered advanced/honors level classes in high schools. Students receive high school and college credits simultaneously.

*IB (International Baccalaureate)*: an academically rigorous two-year advanced college-level curriculum for students in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, resulting in an IB diploma.

*Project Acceleration*: a specific dual-credit concurrent enrollment program “within the College of Arts and Sciences at Seton Hall University, [which] has allowed high school students in New Jersey and New York to get a head start on their university careers. Over the course of their high school career, students can earn up to 22 credits from Seton Hall for approved courses taken in

their secondary schools” (Seton Hall University, 2016).

Stress: a physiological response that is “described as a feeling of being overwhelmed, worried or run-down. Stress can affect people of all ages, genders and circumstances and can lead to both physical and psychological health issues” (American Psychological Association, 2011).

### **Literature Review**

High school students in the 21st century are facing increased and persistent pressures to perform academically at peak levels. Academic stress and anxiety for high school students may be one of many stressors for teenagers; yet the question of whether an advanced/honors course load contributes to excessive stress levels deserves to be examined in greater depth. Vatterott (2019) framed the conversation regarding high school student culture by stating:

Why are so many teens stressed out and disheartened at a time in their lives when they should be happy and carefree? However they got there, whether from the influence of parents, peers, society, or the school, the kids are not alright. I see a teen epidemic of what I call *rudderless box checkers*—four AP classes, check; debate team, check; two sports, check; honor roll, check. (p. 13)

The questions of how and why teens are stressed out is the focus of this study. The review of the following literature will substantiate the findings that academic stress and anxiety seems to be increasing among high school students, as many teens seem overwhelmed and unequipped to handle rigorous and challenging college-level courses in high school.

Faced with dramatically rising college tuition expenses, many families push advanced or college-level courses on their high school students, in hopes of receiving college credits and academic advantages. In addition, many high schools promote AP (Advanced Placement) and dual-credit classes as more rigorous and necessary for college admission to prestigious top-tier

universities. Digby (2016) wrote that skyrocketing college tuition costs forces families to seek strategies to cut down on college expenses by encouraging college-level or AP courses in high school. Furthermore, Thomson (2017) argued that current dual-credit programs are marketed to students and parents as opportunities to save money on college costs, reduce the time needed to receive a college degree, and better prepare students for higher education. This current emphasis “treats education and learning as commodities where value is found exclusively in the efficiency measures of tuition bills, time to degree, and employment statistics” (Thomson, 2017, p. 53).

High school students who chose to participate in advanced/honors programs might do so to better prepare themselves for rigorous coursework in college. Research studies have provided evidence that advanced/honors classes prepared students academically for college-level expectations. Mathews (2009) reported evidence that taking several AP courses and exams helped high school students become more engaged learners and harder workers, as well as better preparing them for college-level academic rigor. Research from the College Board documented that AP coursework for high school students was as rigorous as the equivalent course at the college level (Wyatt, Jagesic, & Godfrey, 2018).

Advanced/honors courses (AP and dual credit) continue to increase in terms of numbers of high schools offering them and students taking them. Warne (2017) found that more than three million participants per year take at least one course in the AP program, making it the most popular program in the U.S. for exposing high-achieving high school students to advanced academic content. Similarly, Walsh (2016) discovered that more than half of all high school students are taking advanced college-level courses and concluded that earning high scores on AP exams correlates with improved college performance. Mathews (2018) found that roughly 16,000 public and private schools offer AP courses across the U.S., and public schools with AP

educate 89 percent of all high schoolers. According to National Center for Education Statistics from the 2010–2011 school year, 82 percent of all public high schools reported that students were enrolled in dual-credit courses and 69 percent reported enrollments in AP or IB courses (Thomas, Marken, Gray, & Lewis, 2013). These statistics reveal how integrated and significant advanced/honors classes have become in American high school course offerings.

In recent decades, researchers have examined how high schools' programming for honors/advanced students for college has become a high-stakes competition. Tai (2008) stated that for high school students "the AP program offers a means of distinguishing themselves from the crowd" (p. 43). Kretchmar and Farmer (2013) noted that for prestigious colleges and universities which attract the most highly qualified applicants, the high school course of study has become a critical component in determining a students' admission to college. Furthermore, as Kretchmar and Farmer (2013) observed:

Many schools advise their candidates that they must take the most difficult course of study available at their high schools to have a chance of earning admission. Students can feel intense pressure to take more Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and dual enrollment (DE) courses than they can handle...As a result, many students engage in the practice of extreme programming—taking 10, 15 and sometimes as many as 20 college-level courses during their high-school careers. (p. 29)

Klopfenstein and Thomas (2009) cited recent college admissions surveys that AP experience factors directly or indirectly into five of the top six criteria in college admissions decisions.

In order to maximize their number of college-level courses, many high school students sacrificed other areas of their lives that might provide more enjoyment and fulfillment.

Overscheduling of advanced/honors classes may also impact students' mental and emotional

well-being. Statistically, stress and anxiety levels for advanced/honors high school students are increasing, with teenagers exhibiting increasing pressure for academic achievement. Hunter and Sawyer (2019) concluded that “all teens experience some amount of stress, and some stress can be healthy. Many teens, however, struggle with significant stress levels that interfere with learning, relationships and other areas of functioning” (p. 775). Vatterott (2019) observed that the relentless focus on academic achievement for high school students supersedes the important psychological needs of teens, which creates a general malaise and emptiness for many students.

Specifically, Hunter and Sawyer (2019) studied teenagers’ perceived stress and anxiety levels and found the most commonly reported sources of stress were school (83%), getting into a good college or deciding what to do after high school (69%), and financial concerns for their family (65%). Furthermore, the results of the survey indicated that high school students self-identify their stress levels as unhealthy and underestimate the impact stress and anxiety have on their physical and mental health. Oxtoby (2007) connected increasing academic stress on high school students with the growing intensity of the admissions game and the pressure on college applicants to seek every possible advantage. Shaunessy-Dedrick, Suldo, Roth, and Fefer (2015) investigated high school students’ perceived stressors, coping strategies, and intrapersonal and environmental factors that students recognized to influence their success in advanced college-level courses. The results of the study indicated that academic requirements and pressures for advanced/honors students were by far the greatest stressor. In contrast, general education students experienced more stressors that were relational in nature, such as with parents and peers, as well as academic struggles (poor grades, difficulties in learning). Recent studies demonstrated a bidirectional relationship between the domains of mental health and academic outcomes. Suldo, Gormley, DuPaul, and Anderson-Butcher (2014) determined that mental health affects

academic outcomes, and academic outcomes affect mental health. Essentially, changes in one domain can predict changes in the other. Researchers found that “such data indicate the importance of the continual monitoring of mental health amidst the ever-evolving academic demands placed on students, as such changes may have mental health consequences for students” (Suldo et al., 2014). Thus, advanced/honors students’ elevated levels of perceived stress may be closely related to increased academic-related demands.

Recent research studies have investigated the impact of academic stress on the social-emotional well-being of high school students. Leonard et al. (2015) concluded that nearly half (49%) of all honors/advanced students experienced a great deal of stress on a daily basis and 31 percent reported feeling somewhat stressed. Female students reported substantially higher levels of stress than males (60% vs. 41%). Students indicated that grades, homework, and preparation for college were the greatest sources of stress for both genders. Furthermore, a substantial minority (26% of all participants) reported symptoms of depression at a clinically significant level. While academic, social, athletic, and personal challenges are considered domains of “good stress” and schools generally promote positive youth development, there is growing awareness that many subgroups of teenagers experience chronic levels of stress that negatively impact students’ abilities to succeed academically, compromising their mental health and escalating rates of risk behavior. Leonard et al. (2015) found that chronic stress for high school adolescents appears to persist into their college years and into adulthood.

The physical and mental toll of an advanced/honors course load on teenagers has been documented. Digby (2016) observed that “both parents and students, even those enjoying the challenge, frequently present the [AP] classes as endurance trials that have made them lift heavy academic loads...AP courses are reputed to assign endless homework and extensive reading” (p.

32). In pointing out the rigorous nature of AP honors courses, Digby (2016) observed how advanced/honors courses are structured to be time-consuming and onerous, thereby causing significant academic stress for students. Abeles (2015) asserted that the evidence of a negative impact on teenagers' mental health is overwhelming. Furthermore, "Our children are paying a high price for our cultural misdirection. Thousands of students are suffering from withering anxiety, depression, eating disorders, insecurity, dangerous sleep deprivation, and even thoughts of suicide" (Abeles, 2015, p. 15).

The learning outcomes for advanced/honors students may be diminished because of the rigorous nature of the program. Abeles (2015) observed the following:

The price of the achieve-at-all-costs approach includes more than sickness. It produces a drill-life mode of education that deadens lessons and narrows students' chances to explore broadly or think creatively. We see even young students disengaging from school experiences that feel impersonal and irrelevant...Ironically, the constant pressure also physiologically impairs children's capacity for learning. (p. 16)

Thus, the intense pressure to succeed academically at the highest levels backfires by undermining the very achievement it strives to promote. Researchers have indicated that advanced/honors courses for high school students may be viewed positively by parents, schools, and students themselves as excellent opportunities for college preparation; however, several studies also documented the negative effects of advanced/honors workload on students' social-emotional health. This qualitative phenomenological study will explore advanced/honors students' perceptions and experiences of academic stress and anxiety on their overall well-being, as well as examine American private high school culture and its promotion of advanced classes in its curricular programs.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants in this study consisted of advanced/honors students from a private Christian high school in northern New Jersey. At the time of the study, the high school had an enrollment of 315 students in grades 9-12. In addition, the overall student population was racially and ethnically diverse, with 52% being White, 23% Asian, 12% Hispanic, 9% Black/African American, and 4% multi-racial. Furthermore, 17.5% of the high school student body was comprised of international students, mostly from Asian countries. Racial, ethnic, and cultural variations may have yielded differing data patterns of students' attitudes and responses, as well as significant differences between domestic and international students. Research studies also indicated that gender may also be a factor in gauging academic and overall stress levels for teenagers (Leonard et al., 2015). Significant factors in this study were the ages and grade levels of the participants. Furthermore, in the 9th and 10th grades, the number of advanced/honors offered to students was much lower than for 11th and 12th graders. Freshman and sophomore students, as well as juniors and seniors, were surveyed and interviewed for consistent and credible data compilation.

In the first phase of the study, students were surveyed in all advanced/honors courses offered by the high school during the first and second semesters. The high school offered 23 different honors-level or advanced classes that represented most of the disciplines: humanities, American studies, math, science, writing and composition, foreign language, and art. Students who took multiple advanced/honors classes were surveyed only once. For the interview part of the study, the selection of the participants was purposeful and representative of grade level, gender, race and ethnicity, and nationality and cultural background. A purposeful sample of

advanced/honors students reflecting the gender, racial/ethnic, and cultural diversity of the high school student population enriched the study results and ensured a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

### **Materials**

A Google form survey created by the researcher (see Appendix A) was given to advanced/honors high school students to measure their perceived academic stressors, their levels of stress in general, and the causes and outcomes of academic stress during their high school years. The survey included 40 total questions for participants to answer, utilizing a five-point Likert scale for 29 of the questions. Four questions were open-ended for student participants to offer specific responses. The survey was piloted with three 11th grade students providing feedback and critique; three colleagues who have experience in designing survey questions offered assistance in editing and revising.

Eight students were purposefully selected to be individually interviewed by the researcher. These students were given the same set of questions, and the questions were made available to students prior to the interview. The interviews were voice-recorded and later transcribed for coding the data into trends and themes.

### **Design**

This phenomenological study has both quantitative and qualitative components that were designed to describe the causes and impact of academic stress for high school students in advanced/honors courses. To answer the three research questions, a survey questionnaire was distributed to all students enrolled in at least one advanced/honors course during the school year. The survey provided baseline data for the researcher to quantify overall stress levels and identify factors that potentially led to students' academic stress, as well as specified the effects and

outcomes on students. However, the survey alone provided limited information about what and how students experience stress with regard to the research questions. In the second phase of the study, the researcher conducted interviews with a sample of students to provide in-depth understanding of the perceptions and experiences of individuals. The assumption in a phenomenological approach is that there is some essence of the lived experience shared by those who have experienced it (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). Thus, interviewing participants about their first-person account of their experiences yielded valuable data regarding the causes and outcomes of students' academic stress. The researcher constructed a narrative to describe and/or summarize the experiences told by participants in the interviews.

The third research question pertained to how private Christian high school culture promoted advanced/honors courses in its curricular offerings. To appropriately answer this question, the Google form survey contained targeted questions to answer this research question, as well as focused interview questions in which participants explained and described high school culture.

### **Procedures**

To conduct this study, all students in all advanced/honors classes offered at the private Christian high school during the year were identified. Prior to the survey, an introductory email was sent out to all participants via school email indicating the purpose and process of the research study (see Appendix C). About one week later, a second email was sent to participants containing the survey form and specific instructions for completion (see Appendix C). Students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity of data collected. In addition, participants were requested to answer all questions honestly and individually. Administration of the high school assured the researcher that no parental or participant consent form was needed for the survey, but

students had the right to opt-out if they so chose. A total of 115 advanced/honors students responded to the survey. Student participants in the survey were given two weeks to complete the survey. Reminders were sent via school email, asking students to complete and turn in the survey. Data from the Google form survey was compiled and analyzed by the researcher.

During the second phase of the study, the researcher conducted individual interviews of student participants, utilizing a semi-structured format with open-ended questions to allow for conversation with interviewees. Each student participant in the interview was asked the same non-leading questions (see Appendix D). Furthermore, interviews were voice recorded and then transcribed to identify trends and themes. Interviews were limited to between 30-40 minutes. To ensure confidentiality of information shared, each participant and the parents/guardians of the student was given an informed consent agreement to sign (see Appendix B). One of the concerns of the study was that the researcher was also the current instructor of some of the student participants. Students were assured that all information given in the interview process will be kept confidential. The researcher captured the narrative and details from the interviews in order to fully describe participants' experiences, attitudes, and feelings about academic stressors for advanced/honors high school students.

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceived causes and the impact of academic stress for high school students in advanced/honors courses. To accomplish this, all advanced/honors students in the high school were sent a Google form survey, which contained 40 questions. Overall, 115 students completed the stress survey. The second portion of the research study involved interviewing eight advanced/honors students who were selected based on grade level, gender, and racial/ethnic diversity.

### Research Question One

**In what ways do high school advanced/honors courses contribute to students' academic stress?** The first research question focused on the perceived stressors for high school students who took at least one advanced/honors class during the academic year. The Google form survey served as baseline data for students' academic and other stressors, yielding a number of themes and trends that were followed up in the interviews. The researcher gained insight into the stresses and anxieties that students experienced on a daily basis. Table 1 summarizes research relating to the open-ended survey question which asked participants to list at least three main stressors they experienced as teenagers.

Table 1

*Results of Survey Question of Main Stressors for Teenagers (Individual Responses)*

Main Stressors	Number of Responses (115 students)	Percentage
School and/or Academic Pressures	104	90.4%
Social Relationships (Peers/Friends)	59	51.3%
College and/or Future Plans	44	33.3%
Parents and/or Family	36	31.3%

Table 2 presents the average response per Likert-scale question that relates specifically to research question one. This set of Likert-scale questions gave respondents the following options to measure their attitudes: 1 as “strongly disagree,” 2 as “disagree,” 3 as “neither agree nor disagree,” 4 as “agree,” 5 as “strongly agree.”

Table 2

*Average Response per Likert-Scale Question for Research Question One*

Survey Question	Average Response
I chose to enroll in advanced/honors classes.	4.43
Getting good grades in school is important to me.	4.59
I want to do my best academically.	4.63
My parents push me to achieve to the best of my abilities in school.	4.43
I want to do my best in high school to get into an excellent college.	4.37
I work harder in school than other students in my classes.	3.43
I feel pressure from peers (other students) to achieve academically.	3.56
A high GPA is important for college/university admission.	4.51
Advanced/honors classes on my transcript are important for the college I hope to attend.	4.17
I feel stressed and anxious because of academic and school-related expectations.	3.90
Academic or school-related stress and anxiety is a major issue for me.	3.37
School-related stress is not a personal issue for me.	2.55
Getting into an excellent college is important to me.	4.25
There are some classes I choose not to take because it might lower my GPA.	3.13

Figure 1 displays a bar graph representation of research relating to the average range of study hours per week outside of the school day that survey respondents self-reported. The majority of advanced/honors students (58.3%) reported study time outside of school of between 11-30 hours.

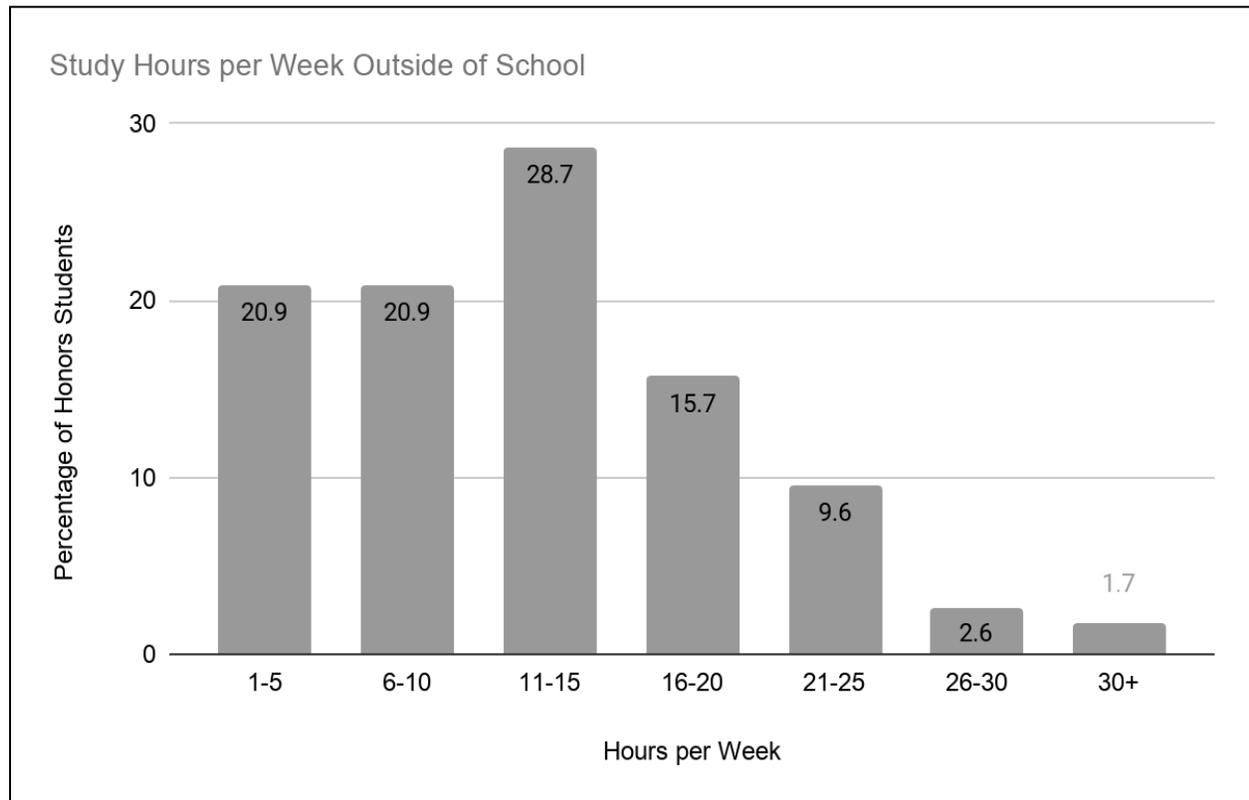


Figure 1. Bar graph of range of survey respondents' reported study hours outside of school

## Research Question Two

**What effects does an advanced/honors course load have on high school students' social-emotional health and overall well-being?** The second research question focused on the perceived effects and consequences of an advanced/honors course load on the social-emotional health and well-being on high school students. Based on the data from Table 1, students reported school and/or academic pressures as their main stressors, with social relationships, college and future plans, and parental/family stress being reported as sources of stress. Survey respondents indicated statistically significant effects of honors-level academic work on their social-emotional

well-being. Table 3 summarizes the average per Likert-scale response pertaining to research question two.

Table 3

*Average Response per Likert-Scale Question for Research Question Two*

Survey Question	Average Response
I think my stress levels as a teenager are healthy.	2.70
It bothers me that opportunities for a personal life and free time are affected by schoolwork.	3.90
My sleep is impacted by school-related expectations and work.	3.99
My parents expect me to get A grades in school.	4.17
I am satisfied with the grades I receive in honors classes.	3.55
I am tired and fatigued because of schoolwork and expectations.	3.74
I feel stressed and anxious about schoolwork.	3.49
I enjoy the challenge of advanced/honors classes.	3.64
I have free time in my schedule for a social life and other leisure activities.	3.10
My stress and anxiety levels impact my overall health.	3.28

### **Research Question Three**

**How does private Christian high school culture promote advanced/honors programs in its curricular offerings?** This research question asked survey respondents to rate the pressures and stress within the Christian high school culture in its promotion of advanced/honors

classes. Table 4 includes data for the survey participants' average response per Likert-scale question.

Table 4

*Average Response per Likert-Scale Question for Research Question Three*

Survey Question	Average Response
The high school's culture pushes me to get excellent grades.	3.53
I think the high school teachers and deans need to better understand students' stress levels.	4.00
I feel pressured by teachers to take difficult honors classes.	2.67
My teachers and school value academic achievement over students' efforts.	3.30

### **Interviews**

For purposes of anonymity, the eight students who were purposefully selected and interviewed by the researcher using the questions outlined in Appendix D were identified as Students A through H in the study. Four females and four males were interviewed, and participants represented 9th graders through 12th graders. Following the interviews with the eight advanced/honors students, the researcher transcribed and coded for themes and trends. The four themes that emerged during the coding process were sources of stress, motivations for taking advanced/honors courses, the impact of academic stress on social-emotional well-being, and the influence of high school culture.

**Sources of stress.** All of the interviewees were able to articulate their perceived sources of stress, with academic stressors being the most prominent. One student reported, "It's school, school, and more school" that dominated her daily schedule (Student A interview, 2-20-20).

Furthermore, Student A indicated the pressure she placed on herself to perform academically were a significant factor in her overall stress levels. School and academic stressors were reported by students more than family or peer pressures. Student B argued that schoolwork itself was not his main source of stress but explained how “it’s like a bigger picture sort of idea...it’s more that I need to get a good grade and I need to keep up with everything” (Interview, 2-20-20).

Furthermore, Student B indicated that in order to get an A in a class and to do the best he could, he placed pressure on himself to achieve at the highest levels. Another student noted a very busy daily schedule, in which sports, activities, and a part-time job added to his overall stress levels. Student C stated, “The nights where everything seems to pile on and on and on” were when he felt the most anxiety and stress (Interview, 2-24-20). Furthermore, Student C explained that low levels of stress were good for him, as it motivated him “because I want to succeed; I want to do well” (Interview, 2-24-20). Student D stated that “homework and getting projects done” were his main stressors on a daily basis and noted that he was taking five advanced/honors courses throughout the school year (Interview, 2-24-20). An 11th grader (Student E) indicated that “pressures for college” and test scores (SAT and/or ACT), as well as achieving a high GPA were significant stressors for her. In addition, Student E, who is an Asian international student, stated that her parents expected her to attend a top 30 prestigious university. Thus, her parents “have a very high expectation of me” (Student E interview, 2-27-20).

**Motivations for taking advanced/honors classes.** A significant question asked of advanced/honors high school students was their motivations for taking advanced/honors classes. Some identified their parents as putting pressure on them to take honors courses, but an equal share stated their own personal motivations as rationale. Student A said, “I have to be ahead of my peers; I just can’t be average. I have to be above average” (Interview, 2-20-20). Furthermore,

the student felt that extracurricular activities and club membership would set her apart from classmates and look good on high school transcripts for college applications. Student D noted that his parents pushed him to succeed, but generally left him to handle school-related matters on his own (Interview, 2-24-20). In addition, Student D reiterated that choices to take advanced/honors courses were his own. Student F explained, “I do feel that pressure from my family to be on top of it all” (Interview, 2-25-20). Student G noted pressure from parents to take advanced/honors classes but added that as he progressed in high school he eventually chose to participate in advanced/honors courses, as he was in control of his future. He stated that “choosing his own decisions” was his number one growth in high school (Student G interview, 3-2-20).

**Impact of academic stress on social-emotional well-being.** Interviewees were asked open-ended questions regarding the impact of academic stress on their social-emotional well-being. Student H mentioned the vast amount of homework required of her in advanced/honors classes and the immense toll this had on her emotional well-being, which included isolation from her friends. She questioned, “Is this even worth it, to put this much work into it?” (Student H interview, 3-4-20). Student A explained the burden that academic stress has had on her high school life: “I’m just so used to having such a high standard for myself...I have been doing this for so long. I can’t stop now, and I won’t stop now” (Interview, 2-20-20). Furthermore, Student A described the “daily burnout” she experiences but explained, “I have my goals in mind” (Interview, 2-20-20). Student B mentioned how the demands of school took away from his opportunities for social life, but he indicated that his academic goals were more important at this point in life (Interview, 2-20-20). Student G shared an experience of a panic attack in which he felt there was a buildup of pressure and stress. He articulated that he did not seek professional

help because “I did not want to feel vulnerable” (Student G interview, 3-3-20). Student H shared the following impact of an advanced/honors course workload on her social-emotional well-being: “The responsibilities never end...I don’t have time” (Interview, 3-4-20).

**Influence of high school culture.** Each interviewee was asked about the high school culture and pressures applied by peers, teachers, and administrators. Student A noted the competitive nature of advanced/honors students for the highest grades and pointed to the “huge gap” between honors and general education students (Interview, 2-20-20). Furthermore, Student A described a “social pecking order” in which advanced/honors students “almost act superior” to non-honors students (Interview, 2-20-20). Student B explained that the administration and teachers of the high school did not put undue stress on him to achieve academically but admitted that knowing others who have gained admission into prestigious colleges/universities definitely motivated him (Interview, 2-20-20). In contrast, Student H commented that teachers of advanced/honors courses “put that pressure on students, as well as minimize the pressure they’re under.” In addition, she stated that teachers expected much more out of advanced/honors students than general education students: “You’re honors, so you must do well” (Student H interview, 3-4-20). Student F stated that she believed the high school did a good job of structuring their honors programs (Interview, 2-25-20). Student B commented that the high school did not have unrealistic expectations for advanced/honors students, but felt his own high standards pushed him towards academic excellence. He stated, “I don’t want to live my life behind the shadows...but I want to be one of those people remembered in history books for doing something great” (Student B interview, 2-20-20). Furthermore, Student B stated that advanced/honors courses at the high school are “difficult but not hard,” indicating that some classes were busy work instead of rigorous in depth of content (Interview, 2-20-20).

## **Discussion**

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to answer the questions: In what ways do high school advanced/honors courses contribute to students' academic stress? What effects does an advanced/honors course load have on high school students' social-emotional health and overall well-being? How does private Christian high school culture promote advanced/honors programs in its curricular offerings? In order to answer these questions, the researcher facilitated a Google form survey for all advanced/honors students in the high school. One hundred fifteen students participated in the survey and provided pertinent foundational data on the research questions. As a qualitative study, the focus of this research was to capture the essence of high school students' perceptions and experiences on the possible link between academic stress and advanced/honors course load. To that end, interviews of eight advanced/honors students were conducted in the second phase of the study. The interviewees were asked open-ended questions that would allow them to provide specific details of their experiences and thoughts regarding academic stress and their participation as high school students in advanced/honors classes.

### **Summary of Findings**

Research studies have documented the perceived high levels of academic stress on advanced/honors students (Hunter & Sawyer, 2019; Shaunessy-Dedrick et al., 2015). Based on the survey results and the interviews collected in this study, there was significant evidence that school and academic pressures were the main stressors for advanced/honors students at this private Christian high school. An overwhelming majority (90.4%) of students identified school and academic pressures as one of their main stressors (see Table 1). Furthermore, social relationships with friends and peers, concerns about college and future plans, and parental/family

pressures were also reported as stressors for advanced/honors students, although the percentages were much lower than for school and academic stress. These findings parallel the American Psychological Association's Stress in America survey in 2014 that found school and/or academic stress was the most commonly reported source of stress (APA, 2014). Interestingly, the average Likert-scale response scores in Table 2 indicated a high degree of student ownership in choosing to participate in advanced/honors classes. Students reported that pressures for grades and academic achievement were significant stressors in their high school experience. In responding to the survey questions of wanting to do their best academically and achieving good grades, advanced/honors students strongly agreed with averages of 4.63 and 4.59 respectively.

Research question two addressed the perceived overall effects of an advanced/honors course load on students' social-emotional health and overall well-being. The survey responses indicated a number of trends that should be considered. Overwhelmingly, students cited physical and mental fatigue and exhaustion as major effects on their well-being, resulting from school-related stress. In responding to an open-ended question on the academic stress survey (see Appendix A), one student wrote, "I lose sight of the essential things in my life." Many indicated sleep deprivation as a common side effect of an advanced/honors course workload. While the vast majority of students perceived their school-related stress negatively, a few responded positively. One student explained, "My stress forces me to want to learn more." Another respondent said, "It motivates me to be the best I can be physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually."

Based on the qualitative responses of students during the interview phase of the study, it is apparent to the researcher how academic stress has become a persistent issue for advanced/honors high school students. In addition, the researcher observed how self-aware

students were regarding the stressors and anxieties their generation of teenagers faces. Each of the interviewees was very open and honest about their individual struggles with stress and anxiety and were able to articulate how academic or school-related stressors affected their overall social-emotional well-being. Student G discussed the competitive nature between advanced/honors students for grades: “They are life or death. I put a lot of emphasis and importance on them. Grades determine future” (Interview, 3-3-20). This speaks volumes about how grades and GPA have become vitally important for honors students who desire to attend prestigious colleges and universities. The race for grades seems to be starting early in high school, as noted by several interviewees. Student A said, “Grades matter because they place you in certain classes in high school” (Interview, 2-20-20). Indeed, this assessment is accurate in that many high schools have prerequisites in order to gain admission into an advanced/honors course.

Advanced/honors students expressed a great deal of stress related to uncertainties about their futures beyond high school, specifically focused on particular colleges/universities they hoped to attend. Juniors and seniors, as well as freshmen and sophomores, were able to identify prestigious colleges and universities as their “dream school.” This ambition makes high school classes and advanced/honors programs more competitive and high stakes. One interviewee explained, “My future is paved out how I want it to look...A lot of my plans are reliant on getting there [prestigious university]” (Student B interview, 2-20-20). In order to achieve these goals, advanced/honors students understand specifically the level of dedication necessary to achieve academically; they believe that working hard in high school and sacrificing some parts of their lives will reap benefits for their futures.

Interviews of advanced/honors students revealed healthy and important aspects of their teenage years they were forced to limit or give up entirely for purposes of schoolwork. Vatterott

(2019) commented that “students are overwhelmed, overworked, and that many students are perfectionists, unhappy with anything but an A” (p. 12). Excessive workloads, overscheduling, and a competitive high school culture leads to a stressed-out generation of teenagers who focus almost entirely on academic achievement; this relentless race for grades and high test scores diminishes the important social-emotional needs of high schoolers (Vatterott, 2019, pp. 12-13). What has changed for this generation of teenagers? How has high school culture impacted their overall stress levels? Student H pointed to one of the core values of our Christian high school—striving for excellence in all areas. She questioned how anyone could possibly be able to achieve excellence in all areas of school life; this struck a chord with the researcher in assessing the goals and core values of a Christian high school. The culture of high schools has shifted to pushing *all* students to achieve academic excellence as preparation for college. For advanced/honors students who are overscheduled, chronic stress may now be the norm, as American high schools continue to promote and expand their AP and dual-credit honors courses. In attempting to understand the perceptions and experiences of advanced/honors students, the researcher has gained a degree of empathy for these young people. Academic stress for advanced/honors high school students can indeed be detrimental to their social-emotional health and overall well-being.

### **Recommendations**

This research study can benefit private Christian high schools in seeking to better understand and help students who struggle with chronic stress related to school and academic pressures. Recent research studies have found alarming levels of stress for advanced/honors high school students, with potentially detrimental effects (Bethune, 2014; Leonard et al., 2015; Suldo et al., 2014). As the number of teenagers diagnosed with depression and mental health issues continues to rise, all high schools need to be attentive to the stressors and academic expectations

placed upon students. As research studies have emphasized, high schools push advanced/honors programs in their curricular offerings as a means for their students to have a competitive advantage over others (Digby, 2016; Kretchmar & Farmer, 2013; Thomson, 2017). It is recommended that Christian high schools critically examine their goals and purposes for advanced/honors classes. In contrast to the prevailing ultra-competitive race for grades in American high schools, Christian schools need to offer a distinctive learning climate that honors the diverse and multifaceted gifts of its students as image bearers of God. This reorienting of high school culture must include a broader definition of success for all students, pushing aside excessive and unhealthy expectations for academic perfection. Striving for excellence should not just be equated with good grades; a Christian high school education should take a holistic approach to empowering students to excel at all types of learning opportunities. While the rapid growth of AP and dual-credit programs in American high schools is well-documented, the study of the social-emotional effects of an advanced/honors course load on teenagers deserves much more consideration.

Christian high schools' mission statements typically reflect the diverse talents and abilities of students, identifying the academic, physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of young people. Nurturing and developing the diverse gifts of young people for work in God's kingdom is at the core of what Christian schools do. There is more to school life and teenagers' lives than academic training, and Christian high schools bear responsibilities to parents and students to redefine success as more than academic achievement. Promoting a balanced view of life for teenagers is essential to fixing the overscheduled, perfectionistic academic culture pervasive in American public and private high schools. This balanced perspective would take into account the intellectual, physical, social-emotional, and spiritual developmental needs of high school

students. As advanced/honors students continue to deal with excessive and unhealthy stressors, Christian high schools have an opportunity to reassess the priorities of its culture. Vatterott (2019) suggested several aspects for high schools to seriously consider, including limiting excessive homework, evaluating students' over-programming of classes and other activities, coordinating the workload across classes, rethinking the daily schedule, and providing students and parents better education on academic stress and mental health (pp. 13-16). Finally, a distinctive Christian education focuses students' hearts and minds to the sovereignty of God over all aspects of His creation. Christian high schools hope to graduate young people with purpose, who are goal-driven to serve and love their neighbors and transform the world for God's ultimate glory. As Psalm 119:105 (NIV) affirms, "Your Word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." That pathway is the bright future Christian educators desire for all of our students.

### **Limitations**

A limitation within this study was that the researcher previously or currently was one of the advanced/honors course teachers of students who were interviewed. It is possible that students were not as open and forthcoming with descriptions and perspectives of their school-related stress because of an existing teacher-to-student relationship. In addition, while the student population of the private Christian high school is racially and culturally diverse, Asian international students and white domestic students may be over-represented groups who participated in advanced/honors courses. The researcher suggests that academic stress surveys and qualitative interviews be conducted in multiple, diverse high schools to gather more evidence.

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**Appendix A****Academic Stress Survey**

*Section 1: This will provide basic demographic information of survey participants.*

1. What is your gender?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Prefer not to answer
2. What grade level are you currently? Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
3. What is your race/ethnicity? White Asian Hispanic Black/African Amer. Multi-racial
4. Are you an international student? Yes No
5. How many advanced or honors-level courses are you taking during this school year? \_\_\_\_
6. Please list the titles of those courses: \_\_\_\_\_
7. On average, how many hours per week (total) do you spend on studying and homework outside of the school day?  
1-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20-24 25-29 30+

*Section 2: This will be rated on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neither agree nor disagree), 4 (agree) to 5 (strongly agree).*

1. I prioritize my academics and schoolwork over other areas (sports, church, hobbies, social life, etc.) of my life.
2. I chose to enroll in advanced/honors classes.
3. Getting good grades in high school is important to me.
4. I want to do my best academically.
5. My parents push me to achieve to the best of my abilities in school.
6. I want to do my best in high school to get into an excellent college.
7. I work harder in school than other students in my classes.
8. I think my stress levels as a teenager are healthy.
9. Difficult and challenging classes cause me stress and anxiety.
10. I feel pressure from peers (other students) to achieve academically.
11. Our high school's culture pushes me to get excellent grades.
12. A high GPA is important for college/university admission.

13. Advanced/honors courses on my transcript are important for the college I hope to attend.
14. I feel stressed and anxious because of academic and school-related expectations.
15. I think the high school teachers and deans need to do a better job of understanding students' stress levels.
16. I feel pressured by teachers to take difficult advanced/honors classes.
17. Academic or school-related stress and anxiety is a major stressor for me.
18. It bothers me that my opportunities for a social life are affected because of school work.
19. My sleep is impacted by school-related expectations and work.
20. School-related stress is not a personal issue for me.
21. Getting into an excellent college is important to me.
22. There are some classes I choose not to take because it might lower my GPA.

*Section 3: This will be rated on a five-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (rarely), 2 (once in a while), 3 (sometimes), 4 (most of the time) to 5 (almost always).*

1. My teachers and school value academic achievement over effort.
2. My parents expect me to get A grades in school.
3. I am satisfied with the grades I receive in honors classes.
4. I am tired and fatigued because of schoolwork and expectations.
5. I am stressed and anxious because of schoolwork.
6. I enjoy the challenge of advanced/honors classes.
7. I have free time in my schedule for a social life and other leisure activities.
8. My stress and anxiety levels impact my overall health

Open-ended questions

1. As a teenager, what three things in your life stress you the most?
2. Who or what motivates you to take advanced/honors classes?
3. What gets in the way of you feeling balanced as a teenager, with time and freedom to explore new things?
4. How does school-related stress affect you physically, mentally, and/or emotionally?

## Appendix B

### Parental/Guardian and Student Consent Form

Dear Parents/Guardians:

For the past few years, I have been pursuing a Masters in Education degree through Dordt University, a Christian university located in Sioux Center, Iowa. I am currently working on an action research project focused on studying academic stressors for high school students. Eastern Christian School is concerned about all facets of our students' well-being as image bearers of Christ. It is my deep hope that this research study will yield data and valuable information that EC can use to improve its program offerings and support services for all students. The interview your student is being asked to participate in is part of a phenomenological study examining the experiences of advanced/honors students and how academic stress affects their lives.

Your son's/daughter's participation in the study will consist of an interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. He/she will be asked a series of questions about his/her experiences with stress and anxiety as a high school student and the impact on his/her life. At any time, your child may notify the researcher that she/he would like to stop the interview and end participation in the study.

Your student's confidentiality will be strictly held. The interview will be voice recorded on a password-protected device and then transcribed by the researcher. Your student's name and other personal identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the study. In addition, no names and identifying information will be shared with other faculty members or administration. All materials collected will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

It is completely up to you as parents/guardians and your student whether or not to participate in the study. I appreciate your consideration for participation in this study, as it will greatly assist me in this research project, but also lead to greater understanding of students' experiences at the high school level.

If you have any questions or concerns, please email me, James Uitermarkt, at [jamesuitermarkt@easternchristian.org](mailto:jamesuitermarkt@easternchristian.org). If you have additional questions, you may also contact David Intlekofer, the high school principal, at [davidintlekofer@easternchristian.org](mailto:davidintlekofer@easternchristian.org).

Thanks very much for considering your student's participation in this study.

In Christ,

James Uitermarkt (researcher)

\*\*\*\*\*

By signing below, I acknowledge I have read and understand the above information. I consent to my child's participation in this interview and am aware that the experiences and information shared may be anonymously used in the researcher's written report.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of student                      Signature of student                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of parent/guardian                      Signature of parent/guardian                      Date

## Appendix C

### Email Note to Stress Survey Participants

Dear Students,

I am conducting a survey for a graduate school research project focused on stress for advanced/honors students. I am very interested in your responses and ask you to please answer the survey questions openly and honestly.

Here is the link for the survey: <https://tinyurl.com/StressAcadSurvey>

The survey is anonymous and will not record your name or email address. Your individual responses will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone. I will use only the data collectively as a whole, to determine trends and averages. For example, "A majority of advanced/honors students spend more than 20 hours per week on homework." This research can greatly assist EC to better understand the needs and stresses of our students.

If you have any questions, please talk to Mr. Uitermarkt about the research study. I really appreciate and value the time you take to assist me with this research.

Thank you very much!

Mr. Uitermarkt

## Appendix D

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Questions:

1. Tell me about your daily experiences as a high school student. Where do you spend most of your time on a daily basis? What activities do you focus on?
2. What are the main causes of stress and anxiety for you? Please share any details you are comfortable with talking about.
3. Do you think stressors for your generation of young people are unique and different from previous ones? Explain.
4. If you had to identify main stressors that you experience, what would you say? (family, school, financial, relationships with friends, etc.)
5. Tell me about your family and racial/ethnic background. Do your parents/family and cultural background affect your expectations for school?
6. How do you feel about academic and school-related pressures on you? Would you explain how this affects you?
7. How does stress and anxiety affect you personally? Can you recall an instance in which stress and anxiety affected your life?
8. How important are grades, test scores, and doing well in school to you? Why is this a priority for you?
9. Does the high school push you to achieve academically? Is that good or bad pressure?
10. Tell me about your advanced/honors classes. Why are you taking these courses? How does the work and rigor involved affect your daily life?
11. What are your goals and aspirations after high school? Do you think advanced/honors classes at our high school will adequately prepare you?
12. What advice would you give to 8th graders who are considering taking advanced/honors courses at our school? What are the possible benefits and negative features of the advanced/honors program?