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### Social Experiences of Hartford Students in Independent School Environments

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# Social experiences of Steppingstone Scholars in independent school environments

By Genevieve Uslander

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Community Partner: Hartford Youth Scholars Foundation

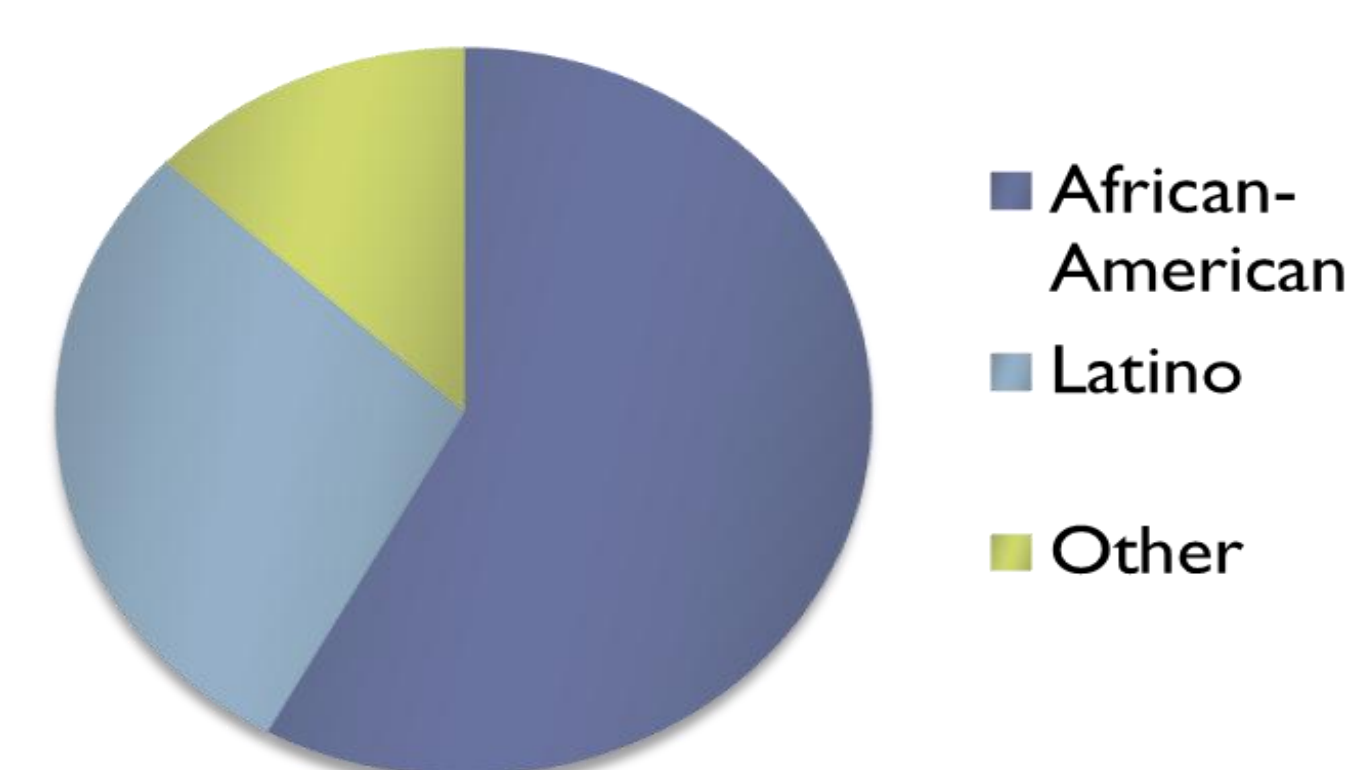
## Abstract

Products of the Civil Rights Movement, compensatory educational organizations' aim is to increase the representation of students of color in elite, white independent schools. Inspired by principles of social justice, they seek to make high-quality education accessible to all. This research focuses on the work of one such organization, the Steppingstone Academy. The academy is housed within the Hartford Youth Scholars Foundation (HYSF). The motivation for this research is the lack of documentation on the social hurdles that minority students face in independent schools and the shortage of social programming to support these students. Fifteen phone interviews with academy graduates were conducted and a mixed methods survey was employed. The analysis of these interviews found that while HYSF students overwhelmingly praise the Academy for its academic rigor and preparedness, they nevertheless face significant challenges related to racial and class isolation in social situations at their respective independent schools. Targeting the social hurdles that student experiences reveal, this research suggests that a mentoring program would be one helpful form of social programming for HYSF students.

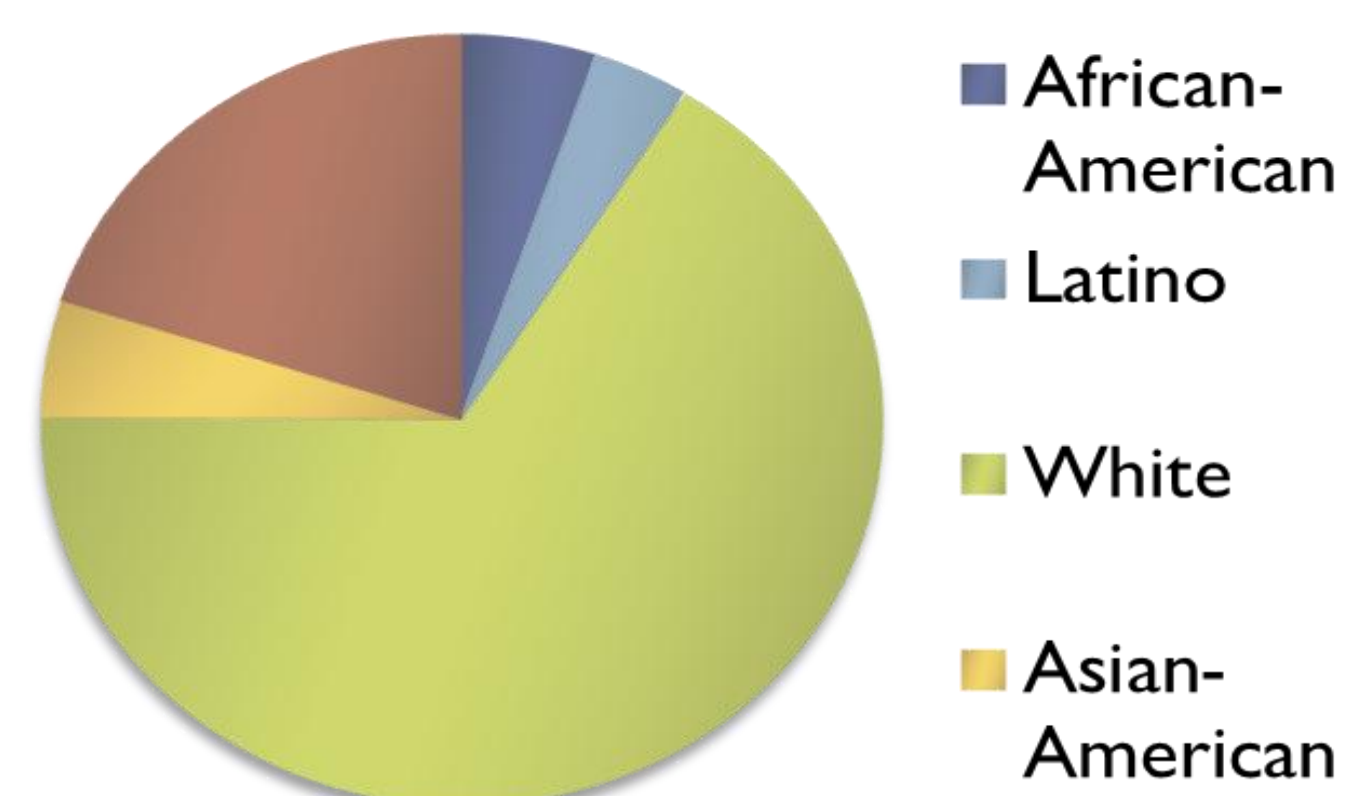
## Introduction

Connecticut is home to the largest academic achievement gap in the United States. This gap is drawn directly along economic and racial lines and reflects greater systemic social tensions in U.S. society today. HYSF students are confronted with issues of race and class in their school experiences as they exit one racially and socioeconomically isolated environment and enter another. The Hartford Public School District is 52 percent Latino and 41 percent black. In Connecticut, white students make up the majority of independent school students at 66 percent. While HYSF does not grant admission based on race or class, it is predominately made up of students of color. 92 percent of HPS students qualify for free or subsidized lunch, education's proxy for poverty. Thus far, HYSF graduates have accessed 2.4 million dollars of financial aid when they have enrolled at independent schools. These figures combined are sufficient to assert that the majority of HYSF scholars are low-income students of color.

### Racial Breakdown of HYSF



### Racial Breakdown of CT. Independent Schools



## Methods

### Student Surveys:

We used a mixed methods approach to collect primary source data. We conducted 15 phone interviews with a non-random sample of students.

### Types of Questions:

#### Academic and extracurricular interests e.g.,

- Are you involved in any extracurricular activities? Sports, theater, newspaper, etc.?
- What kinds of extracurricular activities were you involved with prior to enrollment at your private school? How did you get involved in these activities?
- What is the typical letter grade you receive at your school? How would you compare your academic performance at your old school to your new school?

#### Friendship groups e.g.,

- Please describe your three closest friends at private school? What is their race, class background, academic and extracurricular interests?

#### Challenges faced in private school e.g.,

- What were/ are the three greatest challenge you face/d at your current private school? Can you rank order them?
- Tell me about a specific occasion or specific issue that embodies the challenges you face at your private school.
- How were you able to cope with this event/ issue?
- Do you feel like you were able to overcome it?
- Do you think other students at this school face these or similar challenges?

#### HPP's role in private school experience e.g.,

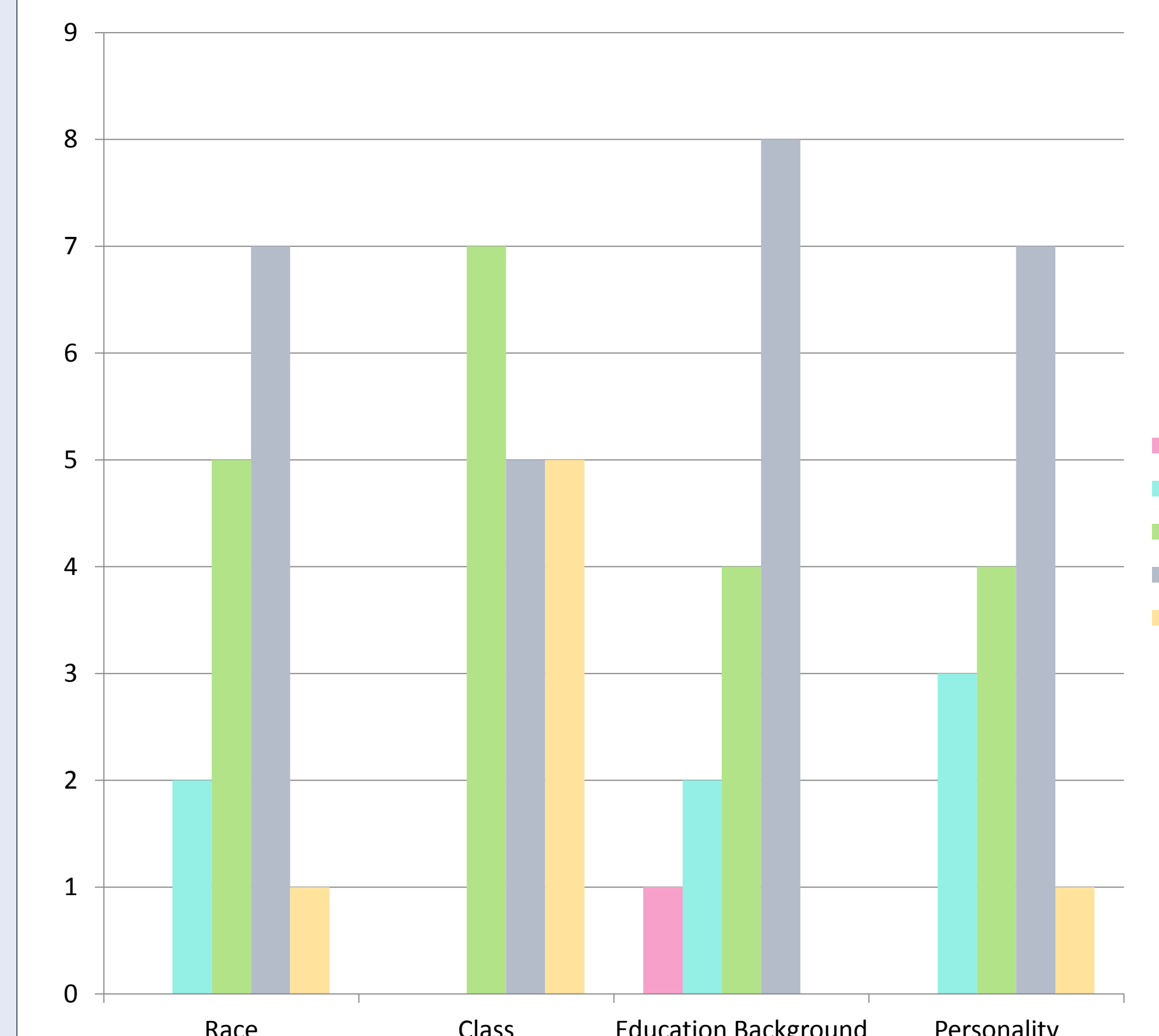
- How did HYSF prepare you for your experience in private school? How do you think they could have prepared you better? Do you have specific suggestions for HYSF in how they could better prepare other students for their experience in private school?
- What is your relationship like with HYSF now? Are you in contact with them? Do you seek them for advice for academic or social situations?

#### Solutions to social hurdles e.g.,

- If HYSF were to develop a mentoring program to help lessen the challenges and prepare students better for their private schools, who would you see as the best mentors?
- Do you think implementing a mentoring program would be worthwhile? Why or why not?

## Results

The bar chart registers the number of students who chose a given response on a scale of 1-5, with the scale measuring importance of each factor in the student's social experience (1 being not influential at all; 5 being highly influential).



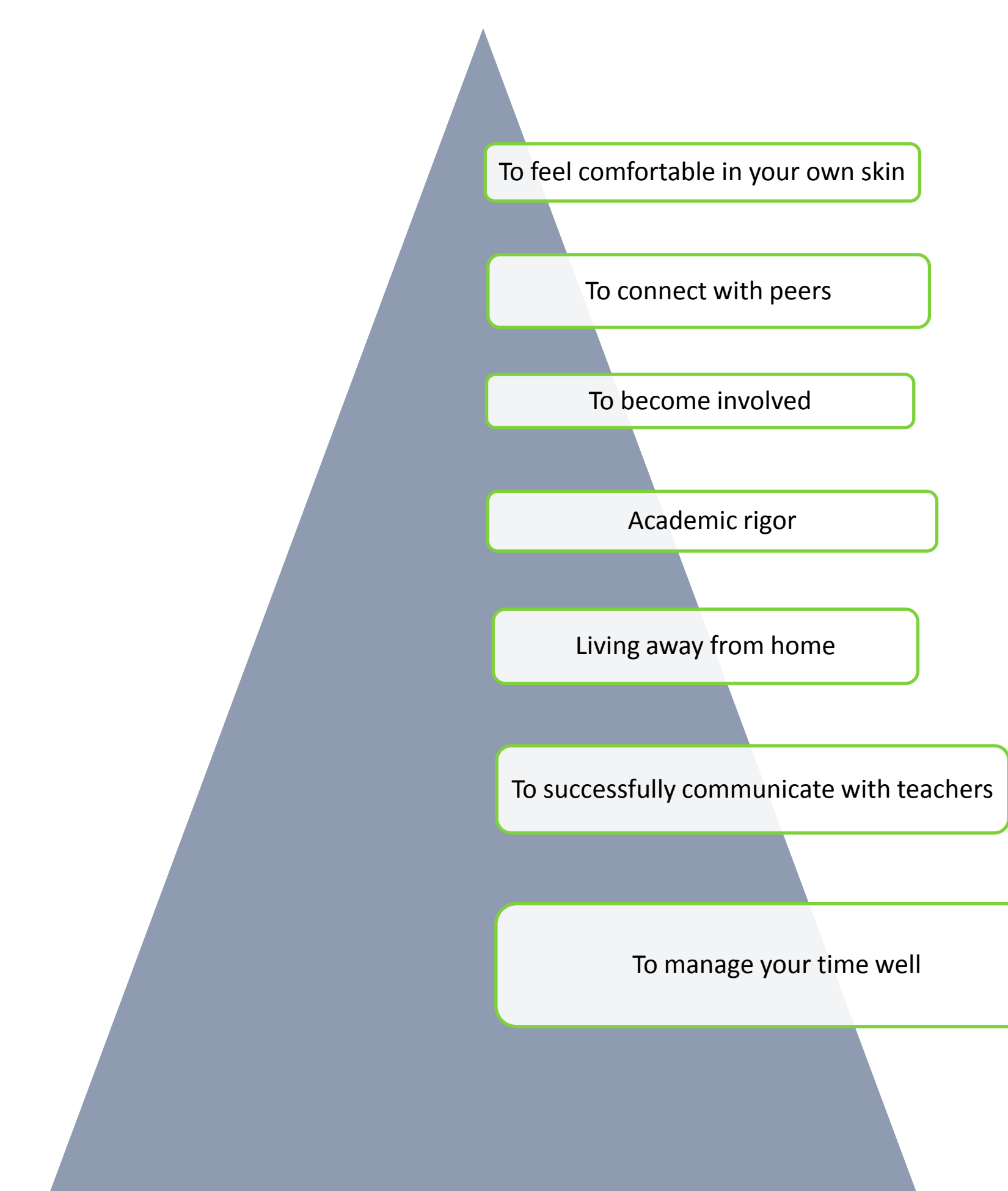
Race: 7 students reported a 4

Class: 7 students reported a 3

Education background: 8 students reported a 4

Personality: 7 students reported a 4

## Results



The above factors were considered when asking students about how well HYSF prepared them for an independent school experience on a scale of 1-5.

## Results

### Academic rigor/preparedness

- "HYSF helped me so much with time management and work load. To be honest, freshman year was easier than Steppingstone. I used to get straight A's in middle school! Don't get me wrong, school is hard, but without HYSF I would have failed out." - Emily Smith\*, 12<sup>th</sup> grade

### Race and class in independent schools

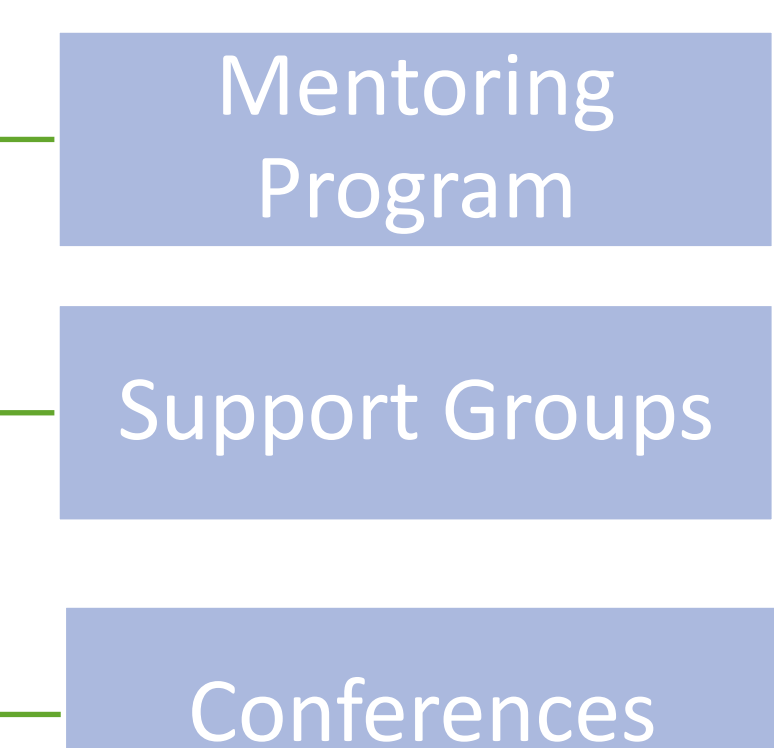
- I'm in a unique situation because first of all, I look white. I am half white, a quarter Puerto Rican and a quarter black. People assume I am upper class which is awkward because I'm not. I was so nervous in the beginning that if people knew I was on financial aid they would judge me, especially since I knew they wouldn't expect it. It was also really uncomfortable when people would ask where I was going for Thanksgiving as if I was going on a vacation." - Maria Diaz, 11<sup>th</sup> grade

### Importance of a Mentoring Program

- A mentoring program would help with knowing how to approach people that aren't from my area. This was definitely the biggest struggle for me and kinda is now. I had no idea how to talk to preppy people. There is a difference in how I talk to my friends from home and here. I'm sort of used to it now." - Mikhail Freeman, 10<sup>th</sup> grade

## Conclusions and Future Work

### Recommendations for HYSF



Through this research, a mentoring program is one of numerous options that can mitigate the social hurdles and isolation that HYSF students face in independent school environments.

## Limitations and Notes

This project was limited by the time constraints of the semester, our sample size, and the individual student responses.

\*All student names were changed to protect confidentiality.

## Acknowledgments

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