College Honors Programs: What Are We Really Doing for Gifted College Students?

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Numerous colleges across the United States have honors programs to attract and cater to gifted and talented students. These programs include first-year experiences, advanced coursework, and special international programs. Students who have benefited from the various gifted and talented programs in high schools arrive on campus and carry their own unique challenges and developmental hurdles. Issues such as grade anxiety, diversity, identity conflict, and career development affect gifted students uniquely and require support that differs from the resources available for the typical student population. This article cites the voids left by these programs and highlights guidelines along which improvements must be made in order to effectively serve this important student subpopulation.

All students possess strengths, weaknesses, and gifts that make them unique. Based on differences in age, race, ethnicity, personality, or geography, students inherently bring different combinations of these characteristics to their educational careers. Educators are constantly challenged to assess and meet the needs of this inherently diverse population. One subpopulation that is critical to identify and assist within the larger pool is that of gifted and talented students.

Who Are Gifted and Talented Students?

According to Gibson and Efinger (2001), gifted and talented students usually perform in the top 3%–5% of their high school population and demonstrate high ability, high task commitment, and high creativity. Haas (1992) described gifted and talented college students as having “high school grade-point averages of at least 3.5, high ACT or SAT scores, good writing skills, and a record of leadership in both academic and a wide variety of extracurricular activities” (p. 14). In Ross’s (1993) national report on higher education, he broadened the definition of giftedness beyond the numbers, saying that “it is the existence of students’ unmet educational need in the local setting that defines who is judged to be gifted.” Whichever definition or exact measure one uses to identify these students,
it is obvious that they are indeed talented beyond their peers.

High school courses, which commonly only require the simple memorization and recall of facts, do not help gifted and talented students develop the increased critical thinking and reflective judgment skills they require in order to achieve their full potential (Mack, 1996). To better serve these students at the high school level, a number of programs have been created that blend the high school and college experiences. The Transition School/Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington, the Early Entrance Program at California State University, Los Angeles, the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted at Mary Baldwin College in Virginia, and Simon’s Rock College of Bard in Massachusetts are examples of programs in which gifted students participate in curriculum that includes college-level courses for the early part of the day and typical high school courses for the afternoon (Robinson, 1997). These programs allow students to continue to interact with members of their age group while still benefiting from the critical-thinking skills introduced and developed in the college courses that supplement and enhance their learning. Some of the coursework can be applied towards a bachelor’s degree once these students begin their undergraduate college experience.

Another genre of honors programs includes those that enable students to take college-level courses within the physical high school setting. Two examples of this type of program are the widely known Advanced Placement program and the International Baccalaureate program (Robinson, 1997). Coursework in these programs is more advanced than that which is provided in typical high school subjects and provides the academic rigor and challenge these students need.

Colleges and universities should be eager to invest in programs that promote the success of gifted students because of the talent they can bring to an institution. In addition, institutions that already participate in blended postsecondary programs should continue to support these students with special programming initiatives when they arrive on campus as college students. However, there is a slight disconnect between the attention gifted students receive in high school and what they experience upon entering higher education.

How Are Colleges and Universities Serving Gifted and Talented Students?

Many institutions have created honors programs to attempt to address the needs of gifted and talented students. The majority of honors programs are academically focused, facilitated by one or more faculty members, and used as a recruitment tool for the university (Long, 2002). Some goals of a typical honors program are to offer smaller classes with more individualized attention, to enable students to work more closely with faculty, to foster a stimulating learning environment, and to allow students to participate in self-selected research (Fischer, 1996).

Robinson (1997) described three types of honors programs. One variety offers challenging introductory and general education courses during the first two
years and then relies on individual departments to offer challenging courses with many of the same critical thinking and interdisciplinary ideas applied to major-specific topics. Another model is an international honors semester that brings together students from several institutions to take part in specialized courses and perform fieldwork that culminates in an integrative research paper. A third type of honors program is based on an honors contract, which allows students to design and complete their own curriculum under the guidance of a faculty member. All of these examples are focused on providing academic rigor for honors students.

Honors programs are outstanding academic resources for students who are not sufficiently challenged by mainstream course offerings; they compel students to go beyond the course material and challenge their academic limits. Haas (1992) praised the honors program system, saying that “those honors students who have been bored by the ‘read, listen to the lecture on the readings, and repeat the information on a test’ approach to teaching often respond very quickly to a learning environment that provides an opportunity to explore and choose among ideas” (p. 18). Mack (1996) described the goals of an honors program through his work at the University of Maryland at College Park. He argues that in order for an honors program to be successful, it must encourage students “[to] reflect productively on different kinds of knowledge…[to] look outside the ivory tower and examine the worldly consequences of what academic disciplines produce” (p. 37). He also stressed the importance of faculty members adjusting their teaching methods to challenge gifted students while they interact with their peers.

In most cases, honors programs feature an interdisciplinary curriculum that challenges the traditional boundaries of introductory level college courses. The interdisciplinary aspects of honors programs are worth emphasizing because they encourage students to look outside their preconceived notions of a subject or topic area and help them to process information in a new, complex manner as opposed to the traditional read-listen-reproduce dogma (Haas, 1992; Mack, 1996; Robinson, 1997).

What Is the Problem with This Honors Program Structure?

Honors programs have undoubtedly enhanced the classroom experiences of gifted students. However, there are many factors that affect these students outside the academic environment. Noldon and Sedlacek (1998) found that

Traditional-aged college students tend to enter institutions of higher education with a similar set of developmental issues, such as establishing identity, seeking autonomy, and achieving competence regardless of academic talent … while academically talented students have similar academic and developmental needs and interests, an environment that is specifically designed for their needs is necessary. (p. 106)
While these specific students are not wholly different from their peers, an environment that meets their additional needs is necessary for their true success in college.

Unfortunately, the structure of honors programs today minimally addresses the nonacademic needs of gifted students. Haas (1992) referred to honors students as “intellectually autonomous learners” (p. 15) and said that programs that attempt to serve these students need to look at their specific developmental needs and practice “educational responsive nurturing” (p. 15). Students do not fully benefit strictly from an academic or curricular focus because they are left without the proper support for their developmental needs as college students. By not addressing developmental issues such as establishing identity and developing autonomy, an honors program is not truly serving the needs of its students.

Socially and developmentally, gifted students face unique adjustment challenges. Robinson (1997) lists several challenges and crises that confront these students when starting college, including the following:

- A habit of being at the top of the class with very little effort and therefore, poor study and time management skills
- “Culture shock” on encountering for the first time other classmates of equal or even higher accomplishment and the stress of coping with one’s first B grade
- Not yet having sorted out a clear picture of ultimate strengths and preferences; having had successes in many domains and consequently, maintaining an illusion of equal potentials across the board
- Because of inexperience in ever having to ask for help, not knowing how to frame questions effectively or whom to ask for assistance or guidance
- Coming from a family or group outside the education mainstream without the tacit knowledge and skills needed to operate within the complex systems of undergraduate … education
- For some gifted students, especially those from minority groups, dealing with issues of integrating their academic lives with their social lives when their friends are not in college or serious about their studies, as well as the negative effects of racial stereotypes about academic promise. (p. 218)

Such a list suggests the potential voids within the current student support service offerings for these students.
One specific area in which universities are failing these gifted students is in helping them develop healthy and reasonable expectations for success. Haas (1992) found that honors students often have exaggerated grade anxiety, and receiving B's and C's is equated with “failing” because they may have only received A's prior to college (p. 16). Professors often do not understand the shock endured by and the consequent actions of an honors student after receiving a B. Haas (1992) further fears these students’ unrealistic expectations may cause them to question their true abilities, thus stunting their development. Without guidance to sufficiently understand the grading systems of higher education, these students are plagued with feelings of failure that can ultimately prove detrimental to their overall college experience.

Gifted students may also be overlooked in the area of career counseling. Robinson (1997) found that gifted students possess the skills necessary for careers in more selective industries or at higher level positions. An in-depth study conducted by Emmitt and Minor (1993) found several factors that contributed to problems in career development specifically for gifted students. The primary factor they termed “multipotentiality,” highlighted that these students possessed many abilities, talents, and interests not found in the student population at large, thereby giving them more potential career possibilities. However, services to aid in exploring these possibilities, as well as information about these opportunities, are rarely brought to the attention of these students. As concluded in their article in the Journal of College Student Development, Greer, Poe, and Sugarman (1997) said that student affairs practitioners “believe in the development of the whole person—the vocational self as well as the intellectual self” (p. 304). With such a belief across the field, it is unacceptable to leave these students without any support in an area as critical as career development.

How Does Giftedness Affect Students of Color?

Many researchers have specifically looked at the challenges gifted minority students face when integrating their academic lives with their social, ethnic and/or cultural lives. One example cited by Noldon and Sedlacek (1998) is that academically talented women of color often feel that their academic success can be perceived as less attractive or even intimidating. Counseling or resources to address such a conflict are seldom publicized to gifted students. Statistically, talented women who are members of minority groups are more likely to fail in their academic endeavors than women who are not labeled academically talented. This is just one example of a part of this population of brilliant minds being inadvertently harmed by the lack of support and understanding for their unique needs.

Part of the developmental process that occurs during college involves negotiating aspects of one’s identity and integrating them into a whole person ready to enter the real world. Gifted and talented students who are members of a minority group not only deal with the integration of their identity as a gifted learner, but also with issues of minority status. In the case of minority women, Noldonand Sedlacek (1998) found that cultural and environmental factors are extremely influential in the lives of women of color and the inability to success-
fully negotiate these factors may lead to their ultimate academic failure.

What Can Practitioners Do?

Additional services must be implemented to support gifted students if institutions are truly to foster the development of all students. Failing to address the nonacademic needs of gifted students makes it difficult for them to reach their full potential. Student affairs practitioners and institutional administrators can implement the following suggestions to better serve this population.

It is critical for all students to be part of a supportive community in which they are able to explore their developing identities. Establishing living-learning communities to facilitate interactions with peers may aid in this process of self-exploration. Indiana University of Pennsylvania houses 103 first-year honors students in a residence hall that also contains faculty offices and guest rooms for speakers and presenters. Such an arrangement allows students to engage in academic and social discussions with the faculty and speakers outside of the classroom. The University of Georgia also houses honors students together to encourage classroom discussions to continue in an informal arena (Fischer, 1996). Both of these programs provide workshops and group meetings that discuss coping with the challenges of college life that occur both inside and outside the classroom. This living-learning community model has proven effective in both cases by providing students with a sense of community and support that they may otherwise lack.

Student development theory can give professionals the knowledge to combat the divide that exists between programs that are academically focused and those that are focused on student development. As students enter college, they face the challenges that come with any transition, which suggests the application of Schlossberg’s Transition Theory. The “4 S’s” in Schlossberg’s theory of situation, self, support, and strategies outline the appraisal process one uses when transitioning to college (Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995). Most pertinent in the case of gifted and talented students is the support aspect. Students are aware of their need for support during this difficult transition and institutions must be ready to provide the resources students need to facilitate their successful adjustment. Support can take the form of providing resources, services, and programs that aid in making a successful transition to college life.

Another student development theory that can be applied to gifted students is Sanford’s theory of Challenge and Support, which holds that there are three developmental conditions: readiness, challenge, and support (Sanford, 1962). Gifted students have displayed behaviors that illustrate their readiness for college. With regard to the components of challenge and support, Sanford (1962) believed that too much support prohibits a student from becoming autonomous and can even foster apathy, while too much challenge discourages students by confronting them with seemingly hopeless situations. Honors courses and the difficulties of transitioning to college provide innate challenges for gifted and talented students; however, without the proper support system and resources in
place, the challenges can be too great and compound problems for these students.

Both of these theories illustrate the critical need for student affairs professionals to support the social, developmental, and emotional needs of gifted students. Student affairs professionals can establish, maintain, and market programs that help gifted students develop interpersonal skills, deal with academic expectations, learn about unique career opportunities, and negotiate conflicts between academic success and identity issues of culture or race. As Schlossberg et al. (1995) and Sanford (1962) both illustrate, without the support to accompany all the challenges and transitional problems these students face, they will not achieve their optimal level of success.

What Does All This Mean?

Robinson (1997) emphasized the high cost of failing these students, saying that without proper support they

will fail to achieve at the high level of excellence and life satisfaction of which they are capable, too many will settle for second best, and a substantial proportion will fall through the cracks rather dramatically—at high cost not only to themselves but to the greater society as well.... Helping gifted students who are entering young adulthood to aspire to excellence, giving them the knowledge and skills they need, and opening to them the doors that will enable them to bring their talents to fruition can benefit us all. Even though such goals are not easily reached, those of us who staff colleges and universities, those who pay for our services and those gifted students who study with us need to take seriously these tasks. (p. 236)

Such a statement cannot fall upon the deaf ears of student affairs professionals, nor can it fail to initiate action. The current structure of these honors programs only addresses the academic characteristics of honors students. As the preceding statistics and reports highlight, students who fall within the gifted and talented category are currently in need of expanded and specialized services that are not being offered. Without support in their unique areas of need, these students are unable to develop to their full potential. Career choices are left unexplored, grade anxiety can jeopardize their performance, and students of color are forced to negotiate their potentially conflicting identities on their own. Many institutions are offering honors programs in various academic forms, but few are truly meeting these needs at the student affairs support level. Through assessment and collaboration of faculty and student affairs professionals, colleges and universities can move beyond this restricted scope and work to better serve, support, and develop gifted and talented graduates.
References


