Gifted Students in College: Suggestions for Advisors and Faculty Members

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The definition and the need for appropriate services to the gifted college population are not as apparent in the postsecondary environment as in the K-12 schools. Many college educators perceive that college curricula provide the needed rigor and enrichment for gifted and honors students to make continuous progress in their learning. We explore perceptions of college honors students who were in gifted programs in their secondary learning environments. Through focus group discussions, students report that often college courses do not meet their need for more challenging learning opportunities. Based on our findings, we suggest ways that college advisors and faculty members can serve honors students in ways that challenge their learning and address their unique psychosocial needs.

KEY WORDS: adjustment to college, honors students, student characteristics, student educational objectives

Relative emphasis: practice, research, theory

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create an inner experience and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling for them to develop optimally (Columbus Group, 1991).

The Columbus Group (1991) definition, regarded as the rationale for determining the appropriateness of K-12 services for the gifted, provides a lens through which higher education professionals can view the unique qualities of a specific population of college entrants. The definition and the need for appropriate services to the gifted college population have not been as apparent in the postsecondary environment as in K-12 institutions, perhaps due to a belief on the part of most college educators that college curricula provide the needed challenge and enrichment that allow students—regardless of special gifts and talents—to make continuous progress in their learning. In this article, we explore the perceptions of college honors students who had been in gifted programs in their secondary learning environments. We suggest ways that college advisors and faculty members can serve honors students in ways that challenge their learning and address their unique psychosocial needs.

Introduction

Learners who are recognized and identified as gifted demonstrate their abilities in one or more of five areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic areas, leadership, creativity, and the visual and performing arts. Public schools use a variety of formal and informal indicators (e.g., IQ scores, achievement tests, recommendations) in the process of selecting students who receive services. Once identified, gifted students may receive differentiated services that meet their particular learning needs and that provide the opportunity for them to develop their gifts. Services include vertical acceleration or horizontal enrichment of various forms: subject or grade acceleration, differentiated curriculum, enrichment programs, and more. Some state educational boards (e.g., Kentucky) even recognize that gifted students require an individual plan that specifies the services to be provided and identifies who is responsible for delivery.

Studies regarding gifted high-school students indicate that challenge, choice, and meaningfulness are essential for optimal learning (Gentry & Owen, 2004). Yet many gifted students, even those enrolled in advanced placement or honors courses, report not having been challenged in their secondary school environments (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004). Public school teachers, pressured by school officials who demand high achievement on high stakes tests and burdened with the glaring needs of weaker students, have difficulty planning and preparing for the optimal learning of their most able students. In fact, the myth that gifted students will "get it on their own" remains pervasive among educators and the community at large. Teacher self-efficacy can also be a major impediment to challenging learning opportunities in the regular classroom (Navan, 1998b). In effect, the needs of the gifted may remain unaddressed, and highly capable students often are unrecognized, underserved, and at risk for underachievement.

Postsecondary options for gifted students include early entrance programs that serve gifted and high-ability high-school students and honors programs for students in their first year and beyond. For those who choose early entrance, Navan (1998a) found that female students reported high self-efficacy as a result of their success in a challenging university environment, and Noble, Arnt, Nicholson, Sletten, and Zamora (1998) reported that participants in an early entrance program appreciated the college culture in which, compared to secondary school, their intellectual aspirations were appreciated and interaction with intellectual peers was encouraged. The Templeton Report, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Kids* (Colangelo et al., 2004), confirms the benefits of appropriate acceleration for students who are unchallenged in school. The authors summarized decades of research in the following words:

> Students who are moved ahead tend to be more ambitious, and they earn graduate degrees at higher rates than other students. Interviewed years later, an overwhelming majority of accelerated students say that acceleration was an excellent experience for them. Accelerated students feel academically challenged and socially accepted, and they do not fall prey to the boredom that plagues many highly capable students who are forced to follow the curriculum for their age-peers. (p. 53)

Lease (2002) reported that in a study of college honors students both males and females in the program displayed higher autonomy scores than students in nonhonors courses, while honors females demonstrated higher scores than males and females in standard classes in the following subtasks: instrumental autonomy, cultural participation, tolerance, academic autonomy, and interdependence. She suggested that lower scores on the subtask of peer relationships indicate that student life personnel may want to focus interventions on this area. Honors students can be grouped for academics or residential life, or paired with other college students who show strengths in interpersonal relationships.

In light of the literature and the desire to inform those in university environments about ways to respond to students' learning and psychosocial needs as participants in college honors program, we determined that a qualitative study of honors students' thinking, as shared in a conversational setting, would assist college and university faculty and personnel. Specifically, we want to reveal the perspectives of the college honors students regarding their perceptions of the following:

- themselves as gifted college students,
- their K-12 experiences as gifted students, and
- their collegiate experience.

Methodology and Procedures

In this study, we reflect a methodology of naturalistic inquiry as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Research with the participants was conducted on the educational setting of a university campus. Thus, we permitted the students to contextualize their conversation through the sharing of common experiences in the environment as well as relate individual reports from past and present settings. The rationale for this methodology was based on our goal of observing the conversation dynamics that emerged; it allowed the honors students to find identity through context. In addition, we employed the human-as-instrument characteristic of naturalistic inquiry (i.e., engaged interviewer) because, as expressed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 39), "all instruments interact with respondents and objects but . . . only the human instrument is capable of grasping and evaluating the meaning of that differential interaction." As a counselor with extensive experience in advising college students and as a specialist in gifted education, we brought to the study the intuitive, felt, tacit knowledge that, according to Bateson (1994), becomes another rich source of data.

We employed the focus group method for data collection because participant conversations enable the dynamic interaction of relationship to emerge as those who are enmeshed in a common environment reveal their stories and their perceptions (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). In another advantage of focus groups, data emerge from group interactions such that observers access insight not revealed by other methods (Morgan, 1988). The interviews were semistructured to allow for perceptions and concepts to surface and for students to reflect and respond to the reported perceptions of their peers. We audio taped each of the sessions and individually analyzed the data using a phenomenological analysis method. After preliminary analysis, we met and identified concepts and constructs as revealed by the data. We then returned to the data, refined our individual analyses and met subsequently to plan the format for reporting the data. Each of us then prepared a draft of her portion of the report, meeting again to finalize and compose the analysis, discussion, and implications.

Participants were recruited from a first-year honors-program class on campus. One of us went to the class, described the proposed research project, and invited students to participate. Class members were asked to sign a list if they were interested in being involved in the discussion/focus group. Participants indicated the best common times to meet. Fifteen students agreed to participate in the focus group study. Of that number, 12 were available at similar meeting times.

Twelve participants came to the first group session. The consent form was read to the group; 12 students signed, indicating their willingness to participate and thus allowing us to utilize the results of the study. The participants were also given a form that provided permission to tape the sessions and to transcribe and quote participant statements. Due to their high engagement in leadership activities on campus, one or two different students missed a session; however, for each session the numbers of male and female participants were nearly equal. All had been previously identified as gifted in K-12 schools. All but two had attended public K-12 schools. One had attended a church school, and the other had attended a high school for gifted students.

The College Survival Skills Game (Kem, 2003) provided the opportunity for students to discuss their experiences in their pre-college and college environments. The College Skills Survival Game generates conversation and multiple perspectives through shared viewpoints regarding common collegiate experiences. From the conversation, a shared culture develops with new understandings regarding one's individual and social selves (Broome, 1991). According to Broome, "Meanings are not simply brought to the conversation; rather, they are a product of the meeting between individuals" (p. 243). Thus, "a third culture develops through the interaction between individuals open to new meanings and genuine discourse concerning differing world views, diversity, and multiple perspectives" (Kem, 2000, p. 23). In addition, Yalom's (1985) therapeutic factors (e.g., universality, altruism, instillation of hope, etc.) are addressed, and students have the opportunity to learn new ways of thinking and being through interpersonal and intrapersonal learning. The game consists of 10 categories of questions. One category is designed for gifted students and reflects the phenomena of giftedness as supported by the literature. For example, questions for the gifted population include the following

- Do you tend to deny or downplay your giftedness?
- Do you tend to be perfectionist? How does this affect you in college?
- How is being gifted in college different from what you experienced in high school?

See the Appendix for the complete list of questions that were used to generate discussion in the focus group.

The group met for an hour for 4 weeks. Each week, questions from the gifted category of the College Survival Skills Game were drawn by the participants. The question was read to the group by whomever drew the question. Discussion followed until the group decided it was time to choose another question. In most sessions, students chose to extend the conversation beyond an hour.

A fifth session was added at the request of the students. Only one of the researchers could be present for the last meeting. Because few students attended the additional session ($N = 4$), the College Survival Skills Game questions were not used; rather, because construct similarities were emerging from the first four sessions, questions were formulated to probe for constructs of giftedness previously identified in research regarding gifted females (Leroux, 1994; Navan, 1998a).

Results and Discussion

Self-perceptions

Throughout the sessions, several ideas emerged in regard to self-perceptions of being gifted. Participants did not choose to view themselves as gifted; they referred to themselves as "just" academically bright with keen abilities to acquire and organize information. Good study habits, critical thinking skills, and the ability to retain information were considered key components. They came to consensus that being gifted meant getting excited about information and learning. One participant said that he considered himself to be well-rounded but not gifted: "I have a good grasp of subjects. I know a lot of information and am a jack-of-all-trades but master of none." Their perception of giftedness included having creative minds, being interested in many things, but not being gifted in all areas. One participant stated that in elementary school he thought, "We were all a bunch of nerds—intellects who didn't have a problem studying." However, the group members agreed that at times parental intervention had been necessary before they would begin their homework.

The group also considered every student to be gifted in some way "but they lack common sense." One male stated he was often frustrated with other

students' level of understanding. Students concurred on their irritation with stupid questions, such as those regarding due dates and required paper length, from their peers. Most participants concurred with the participant's statement that all individuals are gifted in some area "but don't have a chance to excel." One perceived difference seemed to be that gifted students often took failure as a challenge to succeed while other students give up. In the words of one, "Failure motivates me. It is a challenge to do better next time and to work harder."

An interesting finding that surfaced was the phenomenon presented by group members of a dichotomous thought process: They wanted to be different but also perceived as "normal" by their college peers. One member of the study said he would get excited about something and want to share it with his roommate. However, when he began to discuss it, the roommate was not interested and did not get excited. This type of experience was reported as very discouraging to gifted students. The attempt to be normal and share interests was met with misunderstanding at best and sometimes with rejection. Group members stated this had been a pattern since elementary school. Their perception that others had difficulty knowing and understanding them left them feeling isolated except when in the company of other gifted or honors students.

Participants seemed to hold higher expectations and standards because of their giftedness. Group participants stated that they expected more of themselves and of others. One girl stated we have a "responsibility to make a difference for people and for animals." They perceived their intrinsic motivation to self-actualize to be a clear difference between themselves and many of their classmates.

Participants expressed a need to be recognized as multifaceted individuals. They shared that they wanted to be seen as individuals with interests other than just academics. The group members seemed to have been identified solely with their area of academic strength. However, they preferred that others recognize their other interests and abilities as artists, musicians, and athletes as well. Participants also shared their dislike for being seen solely as the person who gets the good grades in class.

They also resented others taking advantage of them. Some of the participants stated that others offered to pay them to write a paper for a class. In summary, the group members agreed that other students did not understand gifted students.

The researchers also observed some qualities unique to this particular focus group. As different students took turns reading questions for discussion, the reader would often be asked by the others to read the question again. Occasionally, the question would be read three or four times. Sometimes the students discussed the meaning of the question. When the group participants agreed on the meaning of a question, discussion began. This process of social construction of knowledge indicated a higher level of cognitive processing on the part of first-year college students than previous studies reveal (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Perry, 1970, 1981). The students displayed their understanding that knowledge from authorities was not the sole venue through which meaning is accessed. Rather, they illustrated that through their collaboration within a learning community, they attained a multifaceted and inclusive understanding of their reality. In addition, if the group began to digress from the question, different group members would refocus the group by indicating the need to return to the question. The group worked in concert to keep the discussion on track and the members on task. If the digression continued or if one person began to dominate the conversation, the group self-corrected.

Reflective of the Literature

During the fifth session, which students had requested, students were asked questions that probed for constructs of giftedness. The constructs on which the final questions were formulated had been previously identified in research regarding gifted females (Leroux, 1994; Navan, 1998a) and also resonated with the two males who attended the last session. Students reported that they use versatile (the most efficacious) coping strategies. Cognitive appraisal through journaling, cognitive behavioral coping as manifested by responses to everyday stress though physical activity, and social coping through sharing with friends and relatives were the most frequent strategies they reported to employ.

Students described many of their life experiences with similar terms or constructs that are referred in the literature as *Dabrowski's overexcitabilities*. Many researchers believe that this model, from Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, may become an identification paradigm for the phenomena of giftedness (Ackerman, 1997). Students report heightened sensual, emotional, and imaginational episodes in which they feel "in the zone." Some remembered imaginary friends in childhood and spoke of spider sense. One student explained, "When a strange situation pops up, I've noticed that I tend to grasp the situation. My per-

ception of what is going on is usually pretty quick and sometimes I wish it wasn't like that." Intellectual overexcitabilities emerged in the joy of solving problems, of pursuing their academic and creative talents with intensity. They demonstrated emotional overexcitabilities when they discussed their intense feelings of empathy with others, their sense of mission, and their belief that they are called to be responsible leaders in society.

Implications for Faculty

From the research, several implications emerged that better inform college professionals. First, gifted students need the opportunity in college classes to be viewed as regular students; they do not like being singled out in regular class as the brightest or the one earning the highest grade. Gifted students do not like to be identified as different unless it is in a gifted class. Such identification in a regular class results in separation and difficulty fitting in with the other members of the class.

The group members identified difficulties they encountered when working in groups for assignments. Classmates often want to be in the same group as the academically gifted student. However, as one group member stated, "Then I do all the work because I want a good grade." Gifted students also want an opportunity to work with other students of the same intellectual level. In this regard, differentiation of assignments that can be used for those at different levels of understanding and skills within the class will address several problems that the gifted face in completing group assignments.

For the gifted students in the study, the relationship with the instructor is extremely important. The give-and-take collegiality between instructor and student in the honors classes was valued by group members. Gifted students indicated that they would also prefer a more collegiate faculty and student relationship in their regular college classes. In honors classes, their achievement depended on participation and knowing the professor as well as on assignments. Gifted students indicated that this participation and relationship with the professor can be missing in the regular classroom.

Gifted group members indicated that regular college classes often focused on massive amounts of information and regurgitation of the content for tests. Participants preferred a faster paced class focusing on depth of understanding and complexity of content. They concurred in the preference for more engaging critical thinking, which enables them to access knowledge, over simply learning information. This is the style of instruction in their honors classes, and group members wished to have similar learning experiences in regular college classes. Again, differentiation of assignments is an appropriate way of encouraging gifted students' unique aptitudes.

We asked participants how college professors viewed gifted students. Group members responded that most professors view giftedness as positive. One member said, "Unless you correct them in class! I pointed out five wrong things on the syllabus on the first day of class. This was not a good idea!" College instructors will need to be more tolerant of such comments from gifted students. These students are more accustomed to thinking critically and can be more willing to express an opinion than their peers.

This research focus group had been the first forum for these students to come together as a group and discuss their perceptions of being gifted. Counseling or discussion groups had been limited or unavailable for honors or gifted students in both their secondary and postsecondary environments. This lack of opportunity can be addressed at the college level. Collaborative discussions of the constructs and phenomena of giftedness provide gifted college students with a deeper self-understanding and promote feelings of relationship with others who share similar backgrounds and sensitivities. Our observations indicate that gifted students can experience extreme loneliness and isolation in college. Gatherings, such as the focus group, may enhance the emotional health of the student, increase the chance of academic success, and possibly lead to increased retention rates.

Implications for Advisors

Several implications emerged from the research to inform advisors about the needs of gifted students. For example, most gifted students attain abstract and dialectical thinking at an earlier age than other college peers. Therefore, advising practices that honor their abilities by engaging them in deep conversations and inviting them to become collaborators in their college planning will be highly effective with this group. Discussions that focus on the *logic of curriculum* (Loweinstein, 2000) empower gifted students to think critically and to share in the decision making so that their course of study reflects and prepares them for their goals. In addition, gifted students will grasp more easily the need for rigorous honors classes rather than regular courses of study. They will likely appreciate the benefits of study abroad and leadership opportunities as well as other enrichment events.

Students who are gifted confront many of the

same psychosocial issues as their college peers but often with more intensity. Therefore, advisors need to be aware of counseling needs in students who otherwise may present themselves as psychologically and emotionally in control. Of great interest to current researchers in the field of giftedness are Dabrowski's overexcitabilities, key facets of his theory of positive disintegration (Ackerman, 1997). Innate sensibilities result in one's ability to react to stimuli. However, gifted students often are unable to filter these stimuli due to their advanced cognitive processing, and therefore, they may react quite strongly to psychomotor, sensual, emotional, and other environmental factors. Advisors and counselors are of great importance in guiding the gifted in stress management by developing specific strategies for handling their unique sensitivities.

Gifted students prefer a collegial style of relationship. For advisors, this involves establishing a relationship with the advisee on a more personal basis and getting to know the student as an individual. Such a relationship may involve providing advisor-advisee interaction outside the office. Advisors can establish rapport before the student comes to campus by attending the honors day programs and meeting with groups of students to establish a more shared relationship. Having spent public school years in an instructional environment that stresses competition between students rather than individual intrinsic motivation, gifted students will benefit from immersion in collaborative experiences with like peers.

Group advising may also be beneficial for gifted students. The opportunity to meet with other gifted students and share information about courses, requirements, concerns, and advisement seems to be valued by gifted students. This strategy offers gifted students the opportunity to discuss concerns informally with the advisor. Furthermore, it promotes student-to-student discussion about issues involved with being gifted in college, an evident need that this study affirmed.

Gifted students may be concerned with completing the program of study as quickly as possible. Incoming gifted students need to be informed about CLEP (college-level examination program) exams and the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of college course content through challenge exams. Many of these students took advanced placement classes in high school and have the ability to take more demanding college-level courses. However, the advisor will need to provide a reality check and explain that the fast track is not always necessary for optimal completion of the program of study. The advisor can assist students with understanding the importance of the process of development through taking advantage of enhancement opportunities on campus, such as getting involved in student leadership, taking courses for fun, and pursuing areas of interest, as well as completing degree requirements.

Career decision-making assistance is required as gifted students are often interested in multiple topics and have difficulty focusing on one area of concentration. Conversation will be essential to discover the goals of the student. The honors track may not be the best choice if it does not help the student reach the goal. Therefore, advisors need to be very knowledgeable about both the honors and regular programs.

Gifted students are not necessarily gifted in all areas and may not be able to learn all aspects of the college or their courses as many professors, parents, and advisors expect. Because of an assumption that the gifted student has the smarts and the maturity to determine the most appropriate course of action, advising may be more passive than active. An advisor with the attitude that the student will seek assistance when help is needed may not notice student problems such as overscheduling, underestimating study demands, and misunderstanding program requirements. As one study participant stated about himself, a gifted student may be a jack-of-all-trades and master of none; therefore, they may have many areas of need. The advisor has the opportunity to be an intervention agent to assist the student in circumventing problem areas and normalizing college expectations and experiences.

Gifted students have a history of success and may not be equipped for the challenges involved with course work or the study and time management required in college. Lower than expected grades and flirtation with underachievement indicate that tools to succeed must be provided. Although some gifted students may view failure as a challenge, others may give up if success is not immediate. Gifted students may have a negative reaction to a recommendation of study strategies and remediation unless it is offered as a way to help the student reach his or her goals and to learn the material at a deeper level.

Typical gifted students have better analytical skills and evidence greater autonomy than many students not identified as academically gifted. The gifted student may mistrust information provided by the advisor, question the status quo, and challenge the university or program requirements. Therefore, in addition to being knowledgeable, the advisor must be prepared for the more direct approach utilized by many gifted students. Advisors

should not to be offended by this interaction and should focus on building and encouraging a collegial relationship. They should strive to understand and respect the gifted students; they should be responsible, efficient, and smart, and they should expect the student to be the same. Advisors can expect to learn from the gifted student.

As discovered in the research, challenge, choice, and meaningfulness are considered important by gifted students. The advisor needs to discuss the options available in both the honors and regular track courses. Honors classes are more demanding but offer the desired interaction with other gifted students and a more open relationship with professors. However, other considerations include work responsibility, family obligations, campus involvement, and other mitigating factors. The advisor can recommend classes known to support and encourage gifted students and in which instruction is differentiated to accommodate gifted students. While advisors should guide students toward high level and challenging classes, they should also encourage them to include less challenging and fun classes. This balanced strategy may prevent gifted students from feeling overwhelmed.

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Appendix Questions utilized for the gifted students in college focus group

1. People sometimes assume gifted students will "make it" no matter what and do not need encouragement. What is your response to this?
2. It will not be necessary for me to attend class at college because I can pass the tests without going to class. Please comment on this statement.
3. Do gifted students tend to deny or downplay their giftedness? Why do you think this might occur?
4. Have you ever wondered if you actually belong in a gifted group? Why? Why not?
5. What problems have you encountered associated with intellectual frustration in day-to-day situations?
6. Is my giftedness viewed positively or negatively by my professors?
7. Have you sometimes been identified more by what you do than by who you are? What is your reaction when this happens?
8. What are advantages and disadvantages of gifted programs in high school?
9. How do you feel when you receive less than the top grade in a course?
10. What does it mean for me to be gifted in college? How is this different from what I experienced in high school?
11. Is my giftedness viewed differently by students who know me and those who don't?
12. What excites you the most about being in college?
13. In what ways do you consider yourself to be gifted? When did you first discover this?
14. As a gifted student, it is not important for me to become involved in club or organizations. I need to focus my attention just on academics. True/False? Why?
15. Do you think children should know their IQ score? Why? Why not?
16. I can take regular classes in college and get high grades or take honors classes that require study and possibly get lower grades. Which do you prefer? Why?
17. How did you find out you were gifted? Which came first – being told you were gifted or thinking you were gifted?
18. What are some advantages and disadvantages of being gifted in high school? In college?
19. It is important to make time every day to do something you enjoy. What would this be for you?
20. Do you frequently say to yourself, "I'll study or work on that project later?" How does this affect your work and/or your grades?
21. Some gifted students are perfectionists. Does this apply to you? How do you think this will affect you in college?