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# Gifted Students, Honors Students, and an Honors Education

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## Gifted Students, Honors Students, and an Honors Education

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The seeming lack of connection between honors and gifted education has puzzled us for some time. Both of us incorporated gifted education and higher education into our doctoral studies, and both of our dissertations used gifted education theories as lenses into the honors student experience. Our lives as researchers and higher education administrators have been spent in the shared space between gifted students and honors programs. We know that this combination strengthens our work with the University of Connecticut Honors Program, and we are excited at the possibility of greater collaboration between the two fields. In this essay, we will respond to Guzy's central tenet that there is a difference between gifted and honors students, using the theoretical framework and structure of UConn Honors for examples. Our recent programmatic changes have led us to the conclusion that we should focus on an *honors education* designed for gifted students and honors students.

One of the prompts for this special Forum of *JNCHC* invited us to “focus on one or more contrasting traits of gifted and honors students.” Not only

does this prompt presuppose that the two labels refer to different groups of learners, but it also implies that there are set definitions for both terms that are agreed upon across the professions. One of us has taught a master's seminar on the various conceptions of giftedness, using Sternberg and Davidson's 2005 book of that title and supplementing it with ideas from the Columbus Group (Morelock) and others. An ambitious recent effort to orient the field around talent development and the pursuit of eminence (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell) prompted significant criticism (e.g., Grantham; McBee, McCoach, Peters, & Matthews). On the honors side, variations in admissions and programming across institutions dictate that the only functional definition of an honors student is one who is enrolled in an honors program or honors college. For that matter, a similar approach is often found in gifted education research, where the operational definition of "gifted" is a student who has been identified as such by their school district.

Rather than viewing these variations in definitions and institutional contexts as an obstacle to greater collaboration between gifted and honors education, we would argue that they provide the opportunity for honors administrators to select the conceptions of giftedness and corresponding bodies of research that will enhance and strengthen their programs. For UConn Honors, that fit has been achieved by establishing a theoretical framework grounded in the work of University of Connecticut Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor Joseph Renzulli. This conception of giftedness aligns with the goals and practices of UConn Honors, and it also promotes greater collaboration between the honors program and the Renzulli Center for Creativity, Gifted Education, and Talent Development. We agree with Nicholas Colangelo on the importance of such partnerships, which in our experience are pivotal opportunities for creating scholar-practitioners among our staff members and providing shared practical strategies and considerations with our researcher partners.

A full exploration of our theoretical framework, which can be found online at <<https://honors.uconn.edu/about-us/theoretical-framework>>, would fall well outside the space constraints of this essay. Providing some context, though, is important. We based our model on three pieces of research. First, our operational definition of giftedness is expressed through Renzulli's 1978 Three Ring conception: gifted behaviors are acts of creative productivity resulting from an interaction of above average ability, creativity, and task commitment applied toward any "potentially valuable area of human performance" (261). As honors educators, our job is to identify students who have the potential for gifted behaviors and then aid their development. This

approach allows us to welcome students who were identified as gifted by their K–12 schools as well as those gifted learners who may have been missed.

Second, Renzulli's 1976 Enrichment Triad Model describes activities that provide opportunities for students to either (1) become interested in new fields or problems to solve, (2) build skills needed for creative productivity, or (3) demonstrate creative productivity and disseminate their products beyond the classroom. Finally, Renzulli's 2002 Operation Houndstooth describes cognitive traits that influence whether creative productivity emerges as well as whether students will apply those gifted behaviors toward the social good. Once we combined these models into our honors theoretical framework, a central tenet emerged. We realized we should focus on an honors education and not just on educating "honors students."

This framework is inclusive both in terms of the number of students—the UConn Honors Program enrolls approximately 10% of the university's undergraduates across all undergraduate schools and colleges—and in terms of the types of students served. Rather than enforcing a dichotomy of "bright" vs. "gifted" learners, a distinction without research support and of questionable utility (Peters), we are able to adapt to a variety of student needs, including academic skill development, assistance with taking creative risks, and the self-discovery of one's interests and values. To support the different academic paths that these students may take, we have multiple admissions points. Students who do not excel in high school and then find their passion at UConn have a place in the UConn Honors Program.

In order to be inclusive of all students who have the desire and academic ability to complete an honors experience, our framework and our practices also support individualization. A formal cohort-based program or lockstep curriculum would not be justified using this framework. We can define and even require certain categories of experiences that support the development of creative productivity, but we do not expect our students to all have the same experiences. For example, we are implementing a leadership project in order to develop students' ability to apply creative productivity to effecting change in their academic, professional, or personal communities for social good. This project—inclusive of scope, timing, and audience—is determined completely by the student with assistance from peer coaches and is based on the student's personal leadership style and goals.

We do not claim that students always enjoy individual experiences or that they agree with all of the requirements. Guzy's example student who is not interested in community service may balk at the leadership experience in the UConn Honors Program, regardless of the individualization, thus

highlighting the importance of intentionality. In the honors program, the faculty and staff have taken great care to connect, via the theoretical framework, our admissions practices, our program outcomes, our curricular requirements, and our co-curricular experiences. However, this framework is only the first step. That intentionality must be clear to the students, or they will still view their honors experience as a set of meaningless check boxes.

For us, the focus on intentionality begins at orientation, when students are introduced to the three concepts of *explore*, *create*, and *lead*, and it continues through the frequent use of reflection. Students begin building eportfolios in conjunction with their first honors events, and throughout their honors career they consider what they have done, what it has helped them learn, and where they are heading as a result of this learning. Reflection helps the stereotypical “school-smart” student build lifelong learning skills, and intentionally connecting reflection to program outcomes helps the more iconoclastic student see the purpose behind program requirements. Eportfolios also fulfill a crucial need for us administratively as we seek data to assess student learning and evaluate our learning outcomes and program objectives.

Finally, this theoretical framework supports our ongoing emphasis on building an honors community. Operation Houndstooth recognizes the centrality of students’ social/emotional and mental health to their personal and professional success. As Colangelo states in his essay, honors students need that peer home. In the precollege environment, intellectual peers may have been scarce, but an honors program can provide deep connections and a sense of belonging. In turn, honors students learn what it means to be a contributing member of multiple communities, which is an essential part of helping them to recognize their own capacity to create change and to understand that working in conjunction with other community members multiplies their effectiveness.

Our model is not the only way—or necessarily the best way—to connect gifted and honors education. The combinations of conceptions of giftedness and honors program structures may be infinite, so there is no limit to the possibilities of a true partnership between the two fields. We have spent three years developing our new model. We involved our honors faculty board, a task force of faculty and students representing all schools and colleges on campus, and ultimately received approvals to pursue our new venture via our university senate and governance structures. The effort has been collaborative from the beginning and has drawn on our university culture, academic structures, and student culture in order to develop a model that fits UConn. The process has crystalized for us our sense of who we are as an honors community and what we believe in as educators. We plan to add to this ongoing

conversation between faculty partners and scholar practitioners through our contributions as researchers. We hope that by doing so we will continue to bring cutting-edge research, the needs of our students, and the values of our program into a UConn honors education.

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