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Fall 2018

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Nicholas Colangelo

University of Iowa, nick-colangelo@uiowa.edu

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Colangelo, Nicholas, "Gifted Education to Honors Education: A Curious History, a Vibrant Future" (2018). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 583.

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Gifted Education to Honors Education: A Curious History, a Vibrant Future

NICHOLAS COLANGELO

University of Iowa

Gifted programs and honors education have evolved along parallel tracks in the past decades with little interconnection or cross-communication. Exploring what these two fields can teach each other should allow us to collaborate in addressing their overlapping goals and potential conflicts in order to better educate bright young students. At both the high school and college levels, teachers often assume that gifted students need no special attention, that we can simply get out of their way and focus our attention on students who struggle academically. Those of us in both gifted and honors education know better. At the University of Iowa, scholars and teachers in the two fields have shared our insights into how to help this special group of students, and we hope to encourage increased collaboration throughout K–16 education.

My introduction to gifted education took place in 1973 as a research assistant at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Counseling Laboratory for Superior Students (Lab). Until then, I had been a seventh-grade social studies teacher, and while I had some very bright students in my classes, I had no experience or training with gifted education. Neither I nor any of my

teaching colleagues had given any thought to issues that might affect gifted students in or out of school.

Over the next four years at the Lab, I worked with high school students who were identified as gifted. Many were from small towns in Wisconsin who had received little special attention to their exceptional academic/artistic abilities, especially in terms of counseling. I learned that being smart in school was a complicated issue. Through individual and group discussion sessions as well as their written responses to open-ended stems, I learned from these Lab students about hidden issues regarding giftedness. Three takeaways from my four years at the Lab formed much of my later work in gifted education:

1. Students chose to deliberately earn lower grades and did not answer questions in class so that they would not be ostracized by their classmates as brains or nerds.
2. Teachers took subtle and not so subtle swipes at their students' intelligence. Comments by teachers such as "Of course you should know the answer to this question, you are gifted" were not viewed as compliments, nor were they meant to be. What these students figured out was that in a school setting, it was not always smart to be smart.
3. Often these students were ready to learn more complex material and at a faster pace, but the curriculum did not allow for such customizing. Educators felt that students in the same grade should take the same curriculum.

So began my understanding of the ambiguous relationships between gifted students and their school environments; the attitudes of peers, teachers, and parents; and societal beliefs about gifted education. I focused my scholarship on these ambiguous relationships when I accepted a faculty position at the University of Iowa (UI) College of Education in 1977. Later, I focused on how acceleration provides the most effective way to teach gifted students, customizing a curriculum based on academic readiness and motivation rather than grade or age.

In 1988, I became the founding director of the University of Iowa's Connie Belin and Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development (BBC) at the University of Iowa (UI), which had a distinct relationship to the University of Iowa Honors Program (UI Honors). Both programs were housed in the same spectacular new building, which provided one home for teaching, research, and service to high-ability K-16 students. In putting these two programs together, we rubbed shoulders daily,

creating a greater possibility for integrating gifted and honors education. This is exactly what happened.

The integration of BBC and UI Honors has boosted the energy of both programs and opened opportunities for the future. The leaders of both programs serve on each other's advisory boards, work with teachers of both programs, have their students living together in an honors residence hall, and share information on the developmental needs of high-ability K–16 students. My writing an essay for the *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* is a direct outcome of our commitments to merge gifted education with honors education.

In the Fiftieth Anniversary issue of *JNCHC* (16.2, fall/winter 2015), thirty-nine college and university presidents wrote about the value of honors programs on their campuses. They consistently mentioned how honors benefits not only the honors students but the greater campus. The values and benefits that these presidents enumerated could be said about gifted programs in K–12 settings, and I will be asking the leading journal in gifted education to consider a parallel special issue on the value of gifted programs as enumerated by principals and superintendents.

While gifted and honors programs seem like obvious soul mates, however, the historical reality has been the opposite. What should be an obvious melding and partnership has not taken place, and this is a loss for both. While the ages of the students and the institutions differ, the values, selection procedures, and goals of each have fundamentally the same heartbeat.

Gifted and honors education share three fundamental and robust commonalities. Foremost is dedication to a rich and intensive educational and social experience for students who are dedicated to going beyond the minimum requirements of their education. A purpose of any viable gifted or honors program is not to replicate what is already available but to provide a unique and intensive program tailored to the students' high motivations and unique learning needs. The programs should demand more and enrich more. Second is that both programs share selection criteria for acceptance that typically include standardized test scores, grades, recommendations from teachers, and personal statements of motivation and goals. Lastly, both recognize that gifted and honors students come from a variety of backgrounds and that high ability does not always demonstrate itself in traditional measures or at particular ages, and so both programs see the need for alternative paths to acceptance.

Gifted and honors programs can both minimize the accusation of elitism that is often thrown at them. The “e” word has been destructive because

the accusation misses the point that these programs are based on legitimate differences in readiness to learn and motivation. The curriculum for gifted and honors programs would not be suitable for many students, nor would they want it. While both gifted and honors programs have been labeled elitist, the characterization has been more destructive at the K–12 level, where the students are younger and the demand for equity in educational attitudes and policy has been greater. Students coming out of gifted programs may be hesitant about entering an honors program since they have experience with the accusation. Honors administrators and faculty can be aggressive in insisting that honors is not about elitism but about willingness to step up to challenges.

Honors can recruit gifted students by being champions of gifted education as well as honors. Here are six ways that honors professionals can strengthen ties to gifted education and thus enhance the recruitment and retention of gifted students:

1. Meet with leaders of gifted centers or gifted programs if they exist on your campus. Residing in the same building may not be an option, but if such programs exist on your campus, working together will have strong benefits.
2. Initiate ties with gifted educators at a national level. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and the National Collegiate Honors Council (NCHC) are the primary professional organizations for the respective programs. They both hold national conferences that could serve as avenues for shared research, programs, and visions for the future. As I write this essay, NCHC's immediate past president, Art L. Spisak, is initiating discussions with leaders of NAGC.
3. Communicate with gifted education teachers. These teachers, much like athletics coaches, know their students and can be helpful to honors programs in recruiting and retaining gifted students. Honors faculty can sponsor presentations and workshops for gifted teachers to share the intricacies and benefits of honors education as well as sharing honors curricula that could be initiated or adapted for gifted students at the pre-college level. At the same time, gifted education teachers can be a constant source of information about what their students want from honors programs.
4. Let gifted students and their parents know how honors can enrich the undergraduate experience and that they have earned passage to such an experience. Never underestimate the power of a personal contact.

5. Provide community to gifted students via honors. These students are seeking a place to feel at home with a true peer group. Honors programs, honors residence halls, and honors classes provide the meaningful community that is difficult to experience at the pre-college level.
6. Be a voice for honors and gifted education. Gifted students know what it is like to be invisible or have to hide their abilities. Honors professionals can give a resounding message that in their programs there is no honor in invisibility. Professors who direct and teach in honors programs can be a powerful voice in speaking up for gifted education.

Both honors and gifted programs provide exciting and in-depth opportunities based on their students' abilities, readiness, and commitments, which are hallmarks for differentiated educational experiences. Excellent students are coming out of gifted programs who would flourish in honors programs and deserve a forceful, unambiguous welcome. Leading the way to a partnership between honors and gifted education can be a new focus for the NCHC. Let the partnership flourish.

The author may be contacted at
nick-colangelo@uiowa.edu.