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Jonathan D. Kotinek

Texas A & M University, jkotinek@tamu.edu

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Are You Gifted-Friendly? Understanding How Honors Contexts (Can) Serve Gifted Young Adults

JONATHAN D. KOTINEK

Texas A&M University

I was tangentially aware of gifted education while I was in elementary and middle school, but my first real awareness of the concept came through my work in the University Honors Program at Texas A&M. In truth, I was not yet working for the University Honors Program; I was a graduate assistant for then-Associate Director, Finnie Coleman, who tasked me with helping host a group of Davidson Young Scholars visiting campus for a lecture from Stephen Hawking to mark the opening of the Mitchell Institute for Fundamental Physics and Astronomy in 2003. I was hired into a full-time role in the honors program not long after, and Coleman asked how we might build a special program that would attract outstanding students like the nine- to fourteen-year-old Young Scholars, who had impressed our physics faculty with their insightful questions on that visit. His question led to my focus on the experience of early entrance to college in my dissertation and my involvement with NCHC's Education of the Gifted Special Interest Group.

My experience explains why my mental schema for gifted and honors education overlap. Not everyone sees the connections that I do, though. As noted in Guzy's lead essay for this volume, I have been an advocate for helping honors practitioners realize how their programs might serve gifted students since 2004. I have also had the opportunity to discuss the overlap with advising practitioners at the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) conference in 2010, focusing on the language of giftedness during the formation of the NACADA Commission on High-Achieving Students.

A special experience for me has been working alongside Nicholas Colangelo, whose lead essay points out shared values between NCHC and NAGC and advocates for working together to address our common concerns. Colangelo's work with Susan G. Assouline and Miraca U. M. Gross in *A Nation Deceived* to synthesize decades of research on academic acceleration provided foundational understanding of the issues surrounding early entrance to college for my own work and, I think, uniquely positions him to provide guidance on bridging the gap between secondary and post-secondary education. I am also pleased to be working again with Annmarie Guzy on the topic of gifted education since working with her on this topic was an early source of my connectedness to NCHC. I want to argue here for adopting an understanding of giftedness as *psychological difference* to help realize Colangelo's vision for future collaboration, using this concept to address Guzy's concerns about the fit between honors programs and gifted learners by suggesting a policy and practice that is friendly to gifted learners and other students who may not fit the traditional profile of an honors student.

TERMINOLOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

College academic advisors differentiate the terms *honors*, *gifted*, and *high-achieving*, according to a survey by Kotinek, Neuber, and Sindt (2010). The survey was sent to 120 participants and got 49 responses (41%). *Honors* students were characterized as "motivated and committed [and] willing to engage in and become distinguished in courses they consider challenging and stimulating." *High-achieving* students were characterized as driven by recognition of success and "academically distinguished relative to their peers" but also as "standing out relative to peers outside the classroom by engaging in research and other extracurricular activities." *Gifted* students were characterized by capability for performance: "a gifted college student . . . surpasses or displays the capability for surpassing their peers in one or multiple areas of concentration not necessarily related to academics"; a significant minority

of respondents noted that the term *gifted* may not be appropriate after high school. The study concluded that advisors commonly talk about *gifted* and *high-achieving* persons and *honors* contexts; it recommended that—while scholarly literature contains contrary examples—the terms *gifted*, *high-achieving*, and *honors* not be used interchangeably even though a single person might be described as both *gifted* and *high-achieving* and be served in an *honors* context. This conclusion comports well with the Szabos chart that Guzy describes in her lead essay, which differentiates gifted and high-achieving learners through example situations.

The field of gifted education has an abundance of overlapping definitions of giftedness and approaches to identifying gifted persons. Some of the commonly referenced approaches include the following works: the 1971 Marland report, which established the national priority for developing gifted learners' potential; Joseph S. Renzulli's three-ring model, which describes gifted behavior as an intersection of above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment; Francoys Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, which describes the development of talents from natural abilities through a process that is influenced by environmental and intrapersonal catalysts; and the 1989 *Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act*, which has provided a federal mandate for gifted programming. These influential approaches, like other psychometric approaches to defining giftedness, focus on giftedness as potential and on identification of giftedness as a priority to develop human resources.

Mönks and Heller argue that psychometric approaches to giftedness do not account for changes across the gifted person's lifespan and that other, less commonly referenced definitions or approaches provide a way to think about giftedness as entailing a psychological difference rather than simply a difference in capability or performance. Understanding why and how this psychological difference sometimes, but not always, results in outstanding performance can help guide our approach to welcoming these students in honors. Approaches of the psychological differentiation sort include Annemarie Roeper's, which defines giftedness as "a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences" (21).

The Columbus Group, which includes psychologists, parents, and teachers who were influenced by the work of psychologists Dabrowski and Terrassier and wanted to describe the lived experience of giftedness, described a theory of asynchronous development in which the intellectual

and emotional development of gifted persons would always outstrip their social and physical development (Morelock). Understanding giftedness as asynchronous development means acknowledging that the student sitting in front of us may have the intellectual capacity for graduate-level study and the emotional sensitivity and range of an adult but that these traits are filtered through the social experience—indeed through the life—of a pre-teen body.

A driving force behind the proliferation of definitions of giftedness has been the need to identify students who should receive the federally mandated educational opportunities “not ordinarily provided” in the public-school classroom but appropriate to the ability level of gifted learners (National Association for Gifted Children; Javits). Such an accountability-based economy that requires careful identification of gifted learners who will benefit from scarce resources may be familiar to honors deans and directors who feel increasingly under pressure to justify the outsized per-student investment typical of the small-section, individualized experience that has long characterized honors education (Smith & Scott). In a roundtable discussion at the 2010 NCHC conference, “Defining Honors: Distilling Meaning from a Chorus of Voices,” Joan Digby made the point that a vital function of honors education is to provide the fit our students will not find anywhere else. This point resonated with my understanding of the Javits bill’s mandate for opportunities “not ordinarily provided” and led to my advocating the inclusion of similar language in the development of the NCHC definition of honors education:

Honors education is characterized by in-class and extracurricular activities that are measurably broader, deeper, or more complex *than comparable learning experiences typically found at institutions of higher education*. Honors experiences include a distinctive learner-directed environment and philosophy, provide opportunities that are appropriately tailored to fit the institution’s culture and mission, and frequently occur within a close community of students and faculty. (National Collegiate Honors Council; italics added)

This definition was developed to complement the NCHC Basic Characteristics documents with more abstract language describing the theories and assumptions that support standard practices in honors. The abstract language of the definition may be easier for honors administrators to adapt to their campus circumstances in order to justify their programs. This definition of giftedness accounts for the wide variety of academic, social, and emotional

preparation necessary to make our programs more accommodating to gifted students.

WHERE DO GIFTED STUDENTS FIT IN?

Both gifted and high-achieving students can be served by the learner-directed environment and philosophy articulated in the NCHC definition of honors education and the markers of excellence that honors programs and colleges provide in their campus contexts. The selectivity and accolades that are typical of honors certainly feed the extrinsic motivation that drives high achievement. So, too, can the focus on scholarly and creative production and leadership described in the “modes of honors learning” portion of the NCHC definition. The opportunity to engage a self-directed thesis and take part in dialogue on broad and enduring questions might also feed the intrinsically motivated gifted learner.

Our population is bimodal, a characteristic not always reflected in our selection criteria and program expectations. As noted in Colangelo’s lead essay, identification and selection are common tasks for both gifted and honors educators. Quantitative approaches that rely on objective scores make this task simpler but may result in passing over qualified candidates whose abilities, as Colangelo notes, may not always be demonstrated in traditional measures or at the expected time. The gifted education model of making selection decisions based on a preponderance of evidence, such as what Colangelo describes (including recommendations, personal statements, and taking into account the student’s motivation), is a practice I believe honors educators would be wise to adopt if they have not done so already. Many of our selection processes probably already privilege characteristics of gifted learners that go beyond high test scores: intrinsic motivation, curiosity, creativity, imagination, and the love of rich intellectual exchange. The true task comes in considering how to admit (or retain) gifted underachievers who demonstrate these kinds of characteristics but do not have the standardized test scores or grades we want because they have blown off what they consider to be useless activities.

In the same way that the NCHC definition of honors education provides useful language to describe what honors is rather than what it looks like, focusing on giftedness as a psychological rather than psychometric difference can suggest strategies for helping these students find their motivation to excel in measurable ways. One simple way to get started may be to organize a discussion group that considers how giftedness is a psychological difference. Giving

students the language of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities (Piechowski) or of the Columbus Group's asynchronous development definition may provide them with the self-awareness necessary to adjust their instinctual reaction against some activities in the service of longer-term goals that are meaningful.

Finally, whether the gifted students in our honors programs and colleges are early-entrance, traditional, or non-traditional students, honors advisors would do well to become familiar with the work on adult giftedness. Lovecky describes five traits of adult giftedness that may result in interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict:

- Divergency—a preference for unusual, original, and creative responses.
- Excitability—high energy and the will to focus that energy in meeting challenges.
- Sensitivity—high levels of empathy and highly developed sense of justice.
- Perceptivity—the ability to see multiple layers of situations, make inferences, and understand personal symbols.
- Entelechy—from the Greek for having a goal, motivation toward a goal and charisma in organizing others around such goals.

Fiedler explains that the unique way that the intellect and emotions combine in the experience of a gifted person has implications for the way the person experiences different stages in life: gifted adults may be masking or denying their giftedness as a coping mechanism for not realizing their potential in ways they believe to be meaningful; and those who do accept that they are gifted may have a heightened sense of purpose as part of their drive for self-actualization. The context provided by Lovecky and Fiedler can help honors faculty and staff in better understanding gifted students' differences in motivation and communicating program expectations in ways that connect to such students' interests and future goals; it can effectively address the need among introverts to develop the capacity for interaction (and awareness of how to practice self-care afterwards), can connect service learning to intellectual passions, and can provide exciting inter-, cross-, and trans-disciplinary options to students whose interests transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries. These strategies will also be useful in opening honors opportunities up to other students whose academic backgrounds may not match our previous expectations but who can demonstrate the ability to benefit from and contribute to

the learner-directed environment and philosophy in honors through motivation, curiosity, creativity, imagination, and intellectual exchange.

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The author may be contacted at

jkotinek@tamu.edu.