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Jennifer Lane

Glendale Community College, jennifer.lane@gmail.com, jennifer.lane@maricopa.edu

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JENNIFER LANE

The Impact of K-12 Gifted Programs on Postsecondary Honors Programming

JENNIFER LANE

GLENDALE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

BACKGROUND

While not all students entering a post-secondary honors program have previously participated in gifted programming, honors programming in theory begins through gifted services in elementary schools and later culminates in honors colleges and honors programs at post-secondary institutions. However, a review of participants in these programs suggests that the population is not consistent through the various levels of the educational system. Studies indicate that gifted services and the participating population change in middle school and/or high school when programming shifts from gifted to honors. Related to these shifts are misconceptions and mistaken assumptions that often correlate to a lowering of standards and rigor in “honors” offerings. In order to develop programming appropriate for any population, the population must first be identified and its needs assessed. Thus, it is important that honors directors at the post-secondary level understand both the services provided and population served in the K-12 system. From this understanding, honors directors will be more aware of the needs of two divergent sets of students, those who are identified as gifted and those who are involved in such programs as a result of parental pressure or other perceived advantages. Further, honors directors may find an underserved population in truly gifted students who are not currently participating in post-secondary honors programs partially as a result of their experiences in K-12 gifted programs.

K-12 GIFTED EDUCATION

One of the first problems in addressing gifted education is establishing the definition of “gifted.” While IQ has typically been a determining factor in the identification of students qualified for gifted programs in the K-12 system, the Marland (1972) Report as well as the United States Department of Education’s (1993) *National Excellence: The Case for Developing America’s Talent* have helped to expand the definition and concept of giftedness. Still, according to Borland (1989), “Although most educators would agree that there are children in the schools who should be designated as gifted, there is very little agreement as to *which* children should be included in this category. One person’s gifted child is another’s troublemaker, while the latter’s candidate is regarded as merely a good test taker by the former” (p. 6). Nevertheless, according to the Davidson Institute (2005), eighteen states mandate gifted programming and

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twenty-four states provide funding for gifted services, each state defining “gifted” in its own way but typically identifying the top three to five percent of the student population.

Absent federal requirements for gifted education and minimal federal funding, gifted education is almost entirely left to the states, and “state budgets for gifted education vary widely, ranging from roughly \$100 million a year to nothing” (Davidson, Davidson, & Vanderkam, 2004, p. 36). Thus, services provided to this population vary as much as the definition of participants. Borland (1989) presents seven program formats typically employed in K-12 gifted education: special schools for the gifted; the school-within-a-school; self-contained classes; multitracked programs; pull-out programs; resource rooms; and provisions within the regular classroom. It should be noted that each of these program formats has strengths and weaknesses in addressing the needs of gifted students, but each attempts to best meet the needs of such students within the constraints of the system in which the program is employed. Nevertheless, much of the programming is concentrated in the lower grades, prior to middle school. As described by Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam (2004), Caryn Ellison, a runner-up for Indiana Teacher of the Year, presents differentiated instruction in her self-contained gifted classroom: “soon they will go to middle school, though, where the self-contained gifted program turns into the equivalent of honors classes, which at any school can have varying levels of difficulty” (p. 47). In fact, many states provide gifted services up to the point at which students become eligible for “honors” courses, Advance Placement (AP) courses, and/or dual enrollment/concurrent college offerings. At this point, students are often no longer specifically identified as “gifted”; “the majority of gifted identification at the secondary level is through self-selection” (Delisle, 1997, p. 476). Thus, gifted and talented (GT) students enter into these course offerings with students who were not previously identified as needing special academic services. In many cases, it is thought that, if the students are willing to do the work, they should be allowed to participate; however, others suggest that, in the era of highly involved parents and increasing pressure for all students to attend college, the reality is not “self-selection” but rather pressure from outside sources to do more, faster. Some question whether this reduces the rigor of such offerings while others argue that such offerings are elitist if they are not available to a broader population. This debate has a long history and is not likely to be quickly resolved.

POST-SECONDARY HONORS EDUCATION

Identification of students for post-secondary honors offerings is not necessarily clearer than identification in the K-12 system. According to V. H. Bhatia (1977), “There does not exist any standard pattern or format for [honors] programs. In fact, they vary from campus to campus in their structure, operation, and scope” (p. 24). Each post-secondary institution determines its own admission criteria, and some have established more specific criteria for honors offerings while others allow all students in good standing to participate. Nevertheless, Austin (1986) builds on the Halverson (1973) report in presenting four educational objectives of any honors program: identifying students “whose ability and motivation are so high that their academic needs would not

be met adequately by existing programs”; providing academic rigor to challenge identified students to excel as independent learners; providing environmental conditions that inspire students to achieve their potential; and providing benefits to the larger college community such as focus on “quality education and a concept of excellence, giving faculty members the psychic reward that derives from working with gifted students, and attracting to the campus scholars and speakers who would not otherwise be there” (p. 7). Given the commonality of these objectives, one might expect greater alignment of practice; however, “the reason for this variation is that most programs have developed in order to meet local needs and have not been forced to conform to any universally accepted idea about the nature of honors education” (Bhatia, 1977, p. 24).

The questions regarding honors programming are further complicated by the fact that postsecondary education in America is experiencing tremendous change as more and more students indicate a desire to attend institutions of higher learning but fewer and fewer of these students are prepared to succeed. This problem is perhaps having its greatest impact on broad-access institutions such as community colleges.

Most community colleges grant access to the entire community, and though many do have placement exams for English, math, and reading, these exams are often used only for placement recommendations, not admittance. This complicates the issue of honors programming since many campuses report that more students are testing into remedial classes each year. Cloud (2002) states that 29 percent of all freshmen entering US colleges in the fall of 2002 were taking at least one remedial class in math, reading, or writing. This statistic is important in that taking remedial courses is correlated with significantly lower chances of completing a degree program (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001). Most disturbing has been the fact that many of these students, having had some experience with “honors” education in the secondary level, do not recognize their own lack of preparedness and demand to be placed in college-level courses rather than getting the remedial help that they so badly need. In such cases, students inevitably fail and often drop out entirely: “About one-half of first-year students at community colleges do not continue for a second year” (Kirst, 2004, p. 52). These problems are not limited to students outside the purview of honors education, and this has raised questions about the honors experiences that students are having before they come to post-secondary campuses.

ALIGNMENT OF K-12 AND POST-SECONDARY PROGRAMS

Part of the problem seems to be the reform that is happening at the secondary level. According to Schneider (2003), “school reform has tied itself to a regimen of standardized answers that ignores, if it does not actively discourage, innovative thinking and wide-ranging curiosity” (p. 13). This is problematic in that these skills are demanded at the college level. Kirst (2004) states, “State high school assessments often stress knowledge and skills that differ from college entrance and placement requirements” (p. 51). Because of this, students who perform well in high school are often still not prepared for college success. In fact, Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam (2004) report that the Higher Education Research Institute’s 2002 survey “found that while

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nearly 46 percent received A averages, fewer students than ever did even an hour's worth of homework each night" while in high school (p. 17). Conley (2003) indicates that even the design and purpose behind K-12 standards and assessments has not been to increase college success rates, so standards-based reform at the high school level will not solve the problem that postsecondary institutions are experiencing. Additionally, it is possible, perhaps even probable, for students to "believe that they are 'proficient' or 'advanced' based on their state test scores" (Conley, 2003, p. 9). Such mistaken beliefs only set students up for further problems by leading them to decline recommended remedial offerings.

Postsecondary institutions must be ready to provide students, parents and secondary teachers with the necessary information to help prepare students for postsecondary standards and make it very clear to students that performance on standardized tests does not demonstrate college aptitude (Kirst, 2004, p. 53). "A commitment to be clear and consistent on the prerequisite knowledge and skills required for success in entry-level general education courses would enable the creation of effective placement procedures that could even motivate high school students to continue to work hard and achieve throughout their senior year" (Conley, 2003, p. 11). A number of studies suggest that the more rigorous the senior year the better the student will fare in college courses. Kirst (2004) suggests that the senior year could be used to "correct college readiness deficiencies and link appropriate senior-year courses to postsecondary general education courses" (p. 54). This strategy would better prepare students for college success, particularly when, as Kirst (2004) cites, the "high school textbook reading level is much lower than the college textbook reading level" (p. 55). In fact, Davidson, Davidson, and Vanderkam (2004) state, "standard textbooks have declined as much as two grade levels in complexity since early in the twentieth century" (p. 16). Creating a more rigorous senior year may be different, though, from pushing students into Advanced Placement (AP) courses or concurrent/dual enrollment. "Princeton University recently instituted basic writing classes to assist some of the highest-achieving kids in America who show up at college unable to write essays" (Davidson, Davidson, & Vanderkam, 2004, p. 17). If highly selective institutions such as Princeton University are experiencing such problems, certainly other post-secondary institutions are as well.

Schneider (2003) points out that postsecondary institutions are changing by replacing survey courses "with more 'hands-on,' investigative, inquiry-oriented and interdisciplinary learning" and "advanced, interdisciplinary capstone" courses (p. 14). Because of these changes, AP courses, or broad survey courses, may no longer reflect "college-level" work and thus fail to prepare students adequately while at the same time providing students a false sense of mastery of college-level material. Additionally, Schneider (2003) argues against concurrent/dual enrollment courses stating that they will "only result in future generations who have an even thinner understanding of science, history, world cultures, languages, and the arts, and even less ability to connect their specialized interests to broad human questions" (p. 14). Schneider's position, though, is controversial. Kirst (2004) argues that concurrent/dual enrollment options should be made available to all students, suggesting that only traditionally identified "college-bound" students are currently being offered this option; however, many high

schools suggest that all students are now considered “college-bound” to avoid discrimination. In consideration of the previously identified gifted population, AP and concurrent/dual enrollment offerings have been found valuable only when they are taught in a rigorous manner (Borland, 1989; Southern and Jones, 1991). This is an important consideration as these courses often attract eager and willing students rather than meeting the needs of truly exceptional and “gifted” students; thus, the level at which the course may be taught is often adjusted to meet the realities of the students enrolled in the course. Additional information regarding the long-term success of students participating in concurrent/dual enrollment options would help settle the debate regarding such offerings.

Either way, postsecondary institutions must do a better job communicating what “they view as more powerful forms of learning” (Schneider, 2003, p. 14) so that high schools are not operating with outdated assumptions about the expectations of college-level performance. “Many professors assert that students who delve deeply into fewer areas and develop greater understanding of and stronger skills in reading and writing, problem solving and critical thinking, do better in college than those who get A’s in high school but don’t develop these skills” (Conley, 2003, p. 11). This should not be kept a mystery from students or the secondary programs that are trying to prepare them for college.

SUGGESTIONS FOR POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS

Post-secondary institutions have a unique role to play with regard to the education of gifted and talented (GT) students. Gifted students “do not stop being gifted when they turn eighteen” (Daniel, 195, p. 235) though the post-secondary system does not typically target this population specifically other than attempting to attract the “best and brightest” to populate the respective campuses. The hope seems to be that GT students will find their way to and through the post-secondary system on their own, perhaps with the benefit of an honors program. According to Pflaum, Pascarella, and Duby (1985), participation in an honors program, particularly during the first year of college, is positively related to academic success. This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that students are assisted in transitioning from a controlled environment into one that requires “self-advocacy.”

As Smith, English, and Vasek (2002) note, a sense of individual identity, as separate from one’s parents, is key in the transition process from high school to the post-secondary environment, and this individual identity is also imperative for students to begin establishing relationships with faculty and other students. Smith, English, and Vasek (2002) present transition issues specific to college freshman with learning disabilities, but one might argue, as it has been suggested in other literature, that gifted and/or honors students are in many ways akin to this population. Specifically, both populations are likely to be transitioning from “an environment wherein students are carefully guided by school staff and individually taught by specialized teachers to an environment wherein they are expected to achieve on their own” (Smith, English, and Vasek, 2002). Honors programs, themselves, can assist students in this transition by

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working directly with students, rather than their parents, and by informing parents of the laws and regulations that govern their access to information regarding students (Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002).

With regard to social connectedness and academic competence, much of the literature regarding college success addresses the importance of the relationship between the student and the instructor, and this may be of particular importance for students entering postsecondary honors programs. As Nieto (1999) states, “learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place, and through the interactions and relationships that occur among learners and teachers” (p. 2). Further, Smith, English, and Vasek (2002) state, “An important aspect that mediates the level of role adjustment seems to be people’s sense of connectedness and belonging to the higher education environment.” This connection is best achieved when the student is proactive in making connections within the new institution and when the institution itself helps the student identify with a community of peers, resources, and support.

Since most honors courses are more rigorous than their traditional counterparts, students may be “in over their heads” before they seek the help that they need. For community college honors programs, this is an important consideration if students are not anticipating the shift from high school expectations and further are not transitioning as fully as they might in attending a residential program at a four-year institution. Additionally, these students may not have the opportunities for classroom support in the way that they had in high school, or they may not have needed outside help before attending college. Often, the concept of visiting instructors during office hours is foreign to first-year students, so students need support in identifying how to get the help that they need. As Tacha (1986) advises, “The schizophrenic mixing of course and enrollment advising, career planning, and a sprinkling of academic philosophy results in little, if any, development of an intellectually challenging and personally supportive relationship between an individual faculty member and a student” (p. 53). Since a student’s typical experience at an institution may not serve to foster a relationship between instructor and student, programs such as community college honors programs can focus on meeting this need.

Community college honors programs have many opportunities to assist students in achieving their “optimal” development, but careful planning and consideration need to be directed to the specific needs of this population. In particular, community building, peer relationships, and student-faculty interactions should be the goals of the community college honors program’s attempts to assist with the transition process. Though many honors students may be academically well prepared for their postsecondary experiences, others, particularly those from traditionally underserved populations, may not be as well prepared and thus in greater need of assistance. These students are often unaware of the possibility that the “honors,” AP, and/or concurrent/dual enrollment courses that were offered at their campuses may not have been offered with the same rigor as courses on the campus of post-secondary institutions. Understanding the continually changing needs of such populations is imperative in designing an appropriate program of support.

ACCELERATION

Beyond honors colleges and programs, other avenues of support for GT learners are available at post-secondary institutions. According to Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004), “acceleration is critical to the vast majority of academically gifted children who will not have the means to find alternatives” (p. xi). For these students, acceleration, “an educational intervention that moves students through an educational program at a faster than usual rate or younger than typical age” (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004, p. 5), is more appropriate than working within the constraints of an age-based academic system. In examining the history of education and the need for acceleration as an option for GT students, Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) state:

The one-room schoolhouse let students learn at their own pace. Teachers knew their students well, and nothing held back a student’s progress. In time, as the population grew, and as America’s culture became more collective and standardized, one-room schoolhouses were replaced by schools that grouped students according to age instead of ability and motivation.

This was not an educational decision. It was an organizational decision based upon a narrow understanding of child and adolescent development that supported the goal of keeping kids with their age-mates. (p. 11)

Further, Colangelo, Assouline, and Gross (2004) add: “In times of war, America traditionally has encouraged students to get through college faster. During these times of crisis, our leaders tend to recognize that ability and skill matter more than tradition and rules” (p. 12).

From the post-secondary perspective, acceleration can take a variety of forms: mentoring of pre-college students; correspondence courses; concurrent/dual enrollment options; advanced placement or other credit by examination programs; or early admission to the post-secondary system. Each of these types of acceleration has been used to varying degrees of success, but all are under the purview of the post-secondary system.

Many post-secondary institutions receive political pressure to be inclusive and accessible to a broad base of students with regard to the offering of concurrent/dual enrollment options, and such institutions are increasingly disappointed with the resulting student performance after completion of such courses as well as the trending performance of students who have completed advanced placement (AP) or other credit by examination programs. As a result, many post-secondary institutions are considering the early admission prospects for acceleration. Nobel and Robinson (1993) report, “accelerated students were more likely to be high achievers in college, to graduate, and to attend graduate school than were their regular age peers.”

In fact, Nobel and Robinson (1993) conducted a longitudinal study that followed the educational and vocational attainment of three groups of gifted young adults: students who entered the University of Washington’s Early Entrance Program (EEP), enabling students to enroll in college after seventh or eighth grade, from 1977-1986;

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students who qualified for EEP but decided to remain in high school rather than participating in this radical acceleration program; and former University of Washington students of the same timeframe who were National Merit Scholarship finalists. One of the most surprising findings of this study was “the fact that the educational aspirations [of the National Merit finalists] in our study (two-thirds of whom were female) appeared to be lower than those of the EEPers [which] may argue for the value of acceleration as a major ally for intellectually competent and motivated young women” (Nobel and Robinson, 1993).

In further discussion of the impact of radical, post-secondary acceleration on women, Nobel and Smyth (1995) report:

Participants in this study developed more confidence in themselves and in their intellectual and social skills as a result of their efforts and the enhanced perceptions of families and friends. The experiences of being surrounded by intellectual peers, something few believed they would have had in high school, meant that they didn't have to hide their level of ability or enthusiasm for learning, or perform less well than their abilities allowed. Although this experience is also true for males who accelerate (Nobel & Drummond, 1992), we believe that it is particularly important for gifted young women because it exposes them to a rare combination of acceptance and encouragement at a critical age and might help to inoculate them against less supportive environments as they get older.

It is evident that both male and female students can benefit when post-secondary systems find ways to address the needs of the gifted and talented population; however, such programs must be constructed with attention to the particular nuances of higher education. Olszewski-Kubilius (2002) points out that special early entrance programs, such as the University of Washington's EEP, are offered at only a small number of colleges and universities, and these are typically not highly selective institutions: “Early entrance students are likely to pursue graduate studies and so the reputation of their undergraduate institution is an important concern” (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). In fact, Janos, Robinson, and Lunnenborg (1989) followed students who were qualified for early entrance programs but chose not to participate and reported that these students, otherwise matched by gender and SAT scores, eventually entered more academically selective institutions than the students who entered the post-secondary system early. This may influence long-term student outcomes in relation to the pursuit of graduate studies and other competitive selections.

The findings of Janos, Robinson, and Lunnenborg (1989) are also significant in light of their application to the community college system. Variance between post-secondary institutions is of greater concern when consideration is given to the entire range from community colleges to highly selective universities. Brody (1998) also raises concerns in stating, “if a student takes a course at a community college and then enrolls in a highly selective university, the community college course may not be equivalent to the comparable course at the selective university in depth and breadth of content.”

As Brody (1998) suggests, post-secondary institutions will continue to formulate their own expectations for students, but just as the post-secondary institutions must more clearly convey expectations to high school students, so must senior post-secondary institutions convey expectations to community colleges for the benefit of students who begin their college-level coursework in an accelerated way. Additionally, it merits consideration that honors programs and honors coursework at community colleges and universities might more closely align with the expectations of more highly selective institutions than mainstream offerings.

CONCLUSION

Students in the K-12 system, specifically in elementary schools, are clearly identified for gifted services; but the identification process for gifted services becomes more obscure as students move into the middle school and high school classes where honors offerings are often provided on a self-selected basis. This change in selection criteria presents problems as students later shift from high schools into the post-secondary system because political implications attach to the fact that such students have been receiving “gifted” or “honors” services and questions are raised if they no longer qualify. To best address this problem, it seems that the criteria used to identify students early in their academic years, elementary school, should be consistently applied throughout the K-12 system. Certainly the testing could, and perhaps should, be offered at various milestones in order to capture as many qualified students as possible, but self-selection for services does not seem to be sufficient in determining qualification for services, particularly when the intent is to maintain the appropriate rigor in such programs. If this were to occur, high school honors offerings would likely align more closely to the expectations of the post-secondary system; however, with the current focus on standardized testing, high schools may be reluctant to focus on the resolution of this problem as it ultimately impacts students at the post-secondary level.

Thus, the post-secondary system is currently facing the problem of addressing the needs of an increasing range of ability in students who are qualified, or at a minimum believe themselves to be qualified, for gifted and/or honors services. Some of the students requesting admission into college honors programs are gifted and talented. However, others are requesting admission into college honors programs because they have been able to identify with the honors label in the K-12 system and do not understand that self-selection for honors in K-12 may not have adequately prepared them for honors programming at the college level. This distinction is further complicated by the fact that post-secondary institutions are themselves clamoring for students, and they may seek to increase numbers, to the detriment of honors programs and colleges, rather than maintain stringent criteria, particularly in community colleges. This may leave truly gifted students without the educational challenge and support they need. If gifted students have left honors programming in the K-12 system for lack of challenge, they may not seek honors programming opportunities at the college level. Early entrance programs are another way to approach the truly gifted and talented population, but these programs require a great deal of management and offer their own drawbacks as well as benefits.

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Perhaps one of the best approaches to resolving the problem of divergent abilities in honors students emerging from the K-12 system is to offer a “school-within-a-school” approach. If political implications are such that a wide spread of abilities will remain part of the honors program, a tiered program could be constructed. In this way, students who want or need the experience of a rigorous program can have that opportunity and receive recognition, such as Honors Program Graduate status, while others can have a different “honors” experience. Students would then be more clearly identified on an ability and motivation basis in transferring to senior post-secondary institutions, and truly gifted and talented students could receive the rigorous experiences that they need and desire. No student would be relegated to a particular level of participation in such a program, so students would be encouraged to work to their highest ability. Society, as a whole, only benefits when all students are sufficiently challenged and encouraged to perform at the height of their potential.

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The author may be contacted at

jennifer.lane@gcmail.maricopa.edu

