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Using Characteristics of K–12 Gifted Programs to Evaluate Honors Programs

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to conduct an exploratory evaluation of honors programs in institutions of higher education. Nine characteristics of exemplary K–12 gifted programs were used for this analysis of honors programs in the Big 12 schools. One school was eliminated from the process because it was the only one without an honors college. Instead, this school had departmental honors programs, and all programs there were somewhat different. Overall results showed that the eleven honors programs we examined complied with the same criteria recommended for K–12 programs. However, compliance with the characteristics varied. Most notably, only one program provided for teacher training. Further studies, such as interviews with graduates of these programs and comparative studies with other universities, might produce valuable insights. Published results of formal program evaluations would help other schools use empirical data to design or improve their honors programs. These studies would begin a new, comprehensive body of knowledge about quality honors programs.

USING CHARACTERISTICS OF K–12 GIFTED PROGRAMS TO EVALUATE HONORS PROGRAMS

The analysis of honors programs in higher education is possibly the next frontier in research on gifted learners according to Robinson (1997). Universities are where most of our gifted youth go after high school, and studies have shown that the majority of gifted learners wish to enroll in

honors programs in their universities or colleges (Boulard, 2003; Christopher, 2005; Kerr & Colangelo, 1988; Robinson, 1997). Nearly two thirds of all four-year institutions have honors programs, almost all large four-year schools have honors colleges or departments (Achterberg, 2004b), and this is an ever-growing trend in higher education (Hamilton, 2004). Some honors programs are organized as individual programs in departments, some are programs by college, and some are university-wide honors programs or colleges. Many believe that the honors programs in these schools capture the majority of gifted students who cannot afford the expensive Ivy League schools (Fischer, 1996) or who prefer not to attend these schools. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information regarding characteristics of good honors programs, and this situation impedes our ability to ensure that gifted students are receiving the most appropriate university education (Rinn & Plucker, 2004; Robinson, 1997). There seems to be some agreement regarding common features of honors colleges (smaller class size, enhanced educational opportunity) (Hamilton, 2004), but there is little research on assessing the quality of honors programs (Huggett, 2003).

The objective of this research was to conduct an exploratory evaluation study of honors programs in higher education institutions. Although traditionally evaluation of gifted education has focused on K–12 learning environments, some studies have been conducted concerning collegiate honors programming. These studies provide some recommendations for honors programs. Some criteria suggest that honors programs should offer interdisciplinary courses (Guerrero & Riggs, 1996; Loston, Watkins, Kirkland, & Smith, 2002; Hamilton, 2004), have teachers who are dedicated (Loston, et al., 2002), offer students mentorships, apply cluster grouping of students, and allow students autonomy with their lessons (Robinson, 1997). Huggett's qualitative study of four honors programs resulted in a grounded theory of honors programs she called the "Environmental Theory of High-Quality Honors Programs." Besides the need for monitoring honors programs and gathering resources for them, she concluded that there should be a culture of shared commitment to individual and collaborative teaching and learning, which includes some of the characteristics already mentioned. However, there is no comprehensive body of knowledge about how honors students should be taught (Achterberg, 2004b).

CHARACTERISTICS OF OUTSTANDING HONORS PROGRAMS

We wanted to work with measurable characteristics of honors programs in order to make some comparisons among programs. We knew there had been many studies of characteristics of outstanding gifted programs.

Accordingly, we reviewed the literature on evaluation of K–12 gifted programs and decided to use these characteristics to evaluate the honors programs rather than those characteristics listed by the NCHC. The following nine measurable characteristics of K–12 gifted programs emerged most often in the literature:

1. An interdisciplinary approach to learning—Typically defined as an exposure to a variety of fields of study and an exploration of broad issues, themes, or problems (Achterberg, 2004a; Feldhusen, 1986; Hamilton, 2004) presented in a challenging fashion (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988).

2. Nonclassroom options—Usually consists of field trips to community agencies, cultural institutions, and interschool seminars, conferences, and internships (Arizona Department of Education, 2000; Dubner, 1984; Maker, & Nielson, 1996; Olszewski-Kubilius, 2003; Hamilton, 2004; Orenstein, 1984).

3. Independent studies—Requires that gifted students be trained in how to choose and carry out an independent project under the supervision of school personnel (Arizona Department of Education, 2000; Dubner, 1984; Fischer, 1996; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Maker & Nielson, 1996; Maryland State Department of Education, 1983; Van Tassel-Baska, 2003) and that the project be publicly shared and critiqued (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988).

4. Students involved in their own curriculum development—Allows students to be heavily involved in decisions about the content or types of projects they study. Honors programs can allow students their choice of material, activities, content, and outcomes while encouraging students to become more self-evaluative (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988; Maryland State Department of Education, 1983).

5. Screening and identification procedures—Provides for systematic screening to find exceptional students (Orenstein, 1984). The identification process should require that multiple criteria be used to identify gifted students (Feldhusen & Jarwan, 2000; Khatena, 1992). The Texas State Plan for the Education of the Gifted and Talented (2004) released by the Texas Education Agency's Division of Advanced Academic Services describes acceptable, recognized, and exemplary identification procedures, which also include multiple criteria (Texas Education Agency, 2004). In addition, screening procedures must include a system of identification for gifted minorities, ensuring that they are not neglected by the program (Feldhusen, 1986; Gregory, et al., 1988).

6. Mentoring—Classified as an in-depth relationship between a young adult and a community professional over an extended period of time (Davis & Rimm, 1994; Robinson, 1997). In K–12 education, the mentor should not be a school official (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994) but rather a member of the community who can serve as a model of success and high standards for the student to follow (Feldhusen, 1986). In university honors programs, the students are most often also mentored by their faculty advisors or a professor with whom they have interactions outside of the classroom (Fischer, 1996).

7. Evaluation of the program—Monitors the effectiveness of the program using both formal and informal procedures (Arizona Department of Education, 2000; Baldwin, 1994; Davis & Rimm, 1994; Feldhusen, 1986; Gregory, et al., 1986; Guerrero & Riggs, 1996; Orenstein, 1984). A good evaluation plan provides information for decision makers regarding program improvement, installs a plan for ongoing evaluation, and assesses the processes and products of each component of programs for gifted learners (Texas Education Agency, 2004).

8. Guidance support for students—Provides counseling services to help students cope with academic difficulties and personal problems (Davis & Rimm, 1994) as well as career decisions (Schroer & Dorn, 1986). In addition, guidance programs have ongoing provisions for regular meetings and give attention to the social and emotional needs of the students (Fischer, 1996; German, 1995).

9. Teacher training—Makes teachers aware of the nature and needs of gifted learners (Cross & Dobbs, 1987; Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; National Association for Gifted Children, 1998) and of how to increase the level, complexity, and pace of the curriculum (Feldhusen, 1994; National Association for Gifted Children, 1998; VanTassel-Baska, 2003).

Some recommendations for characteristics, such as parent involvement, were left off of this list because we could find no appropriate correlation for them in higher education. The nature of parent involvement in K–12 education is different from that in university programs. However, for the most part, those doing research in this area believe that honors colleges and programs accommodate the gifted students who attend public universities and colleges (Boulard, 2003; Christopher, 2005; Kerr & Colangelo, 1988; Robinson, 1997;). Therefore, we felt confident in using the nine characteristics we pulled from gifted programs in K–12 schools to evaluate honors programs in higher education.

METHOD

Participants included the Big 12 universities. These were Baylor University, Iowa State, Kansas State University, Oklahoma State University, Texas A&M University, Texas Tech University, University of Colorado, University of Kansas, University of Missouri at Columbia, University of Nebraska, University of Oklahoma, and University of Texas. These were chosen following the assumption that they are similar universities that share many common characteristics including geographic location. Additionally, these universities share characteristics with many other research universities in other locations in the United States. Accordingly, results of this study will generalize to the Big 12 schools as well as to other research universities similar to them.

Instrumentation used to evaluate the honors programs in those schools was drawn from the nine characteristics of good K–12 gifted programs described earlier. Initially, programs were examined for the presence or absence of each of the characteristics. This method proved to be problematic since we noticed that there were many levels of implementation in the schools. We then decided to use a Likert scale from 1 to 5 with 5 representing fully implemented and 1 representing not implemented. This scoring system also proved to be unsatisfactory. This simple scale failed to allow us to report accurate information. Therefore, we created a ranking system using a scale from 1 to 5 for each of the nine characteristics, based on the data we observed. This ranking system can be seen in Figure 1. The use of this final method of scoring was the system we finally chose because it communicates more information to the reader and scores more accurately reflect the results for comparison across schools.

Procedures in this exploration first included examination of the websites of the twelve universities in order to note the presence or absence of each of the nine characteristics of good K–12 gifted programs. Because some websites did not contain enough information, we also telephoned and sent e-mails to the directors of some honors programs. Eleven of the twelve universities defined honors colleges as centrally administered programs. Kansas State had programs within departments and differences among the programs. Because of the difference between Kansas State and the other universities, we eliminated Kansas State from the analysis. All further analyses included only the other 11 universities.

Analysis of the results began with two of the researchers reaching a consensus on scoring for each school according to the nine-characteristics ranking system. Results were obtained for each school and averaged across schools for each item. In order to communicate more information on the results, the mode was also noted for each item.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The means and the modes of the nine characteristics across all eleven schools were calculated. The mode adds information about the ranking most frequently chosen for each characteristic. Nonclassroom options had the highest mean (M = 4.55, Mode = 5) with guidance and support having the second highest mean (M = 4.18, Mode = 5). The characteristics of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching, independent studies, and program evaluation had equal means (M = 4.00, Modes = 3, 3, 4). The three characteristics that were lower were students involved in their own curriculum development (M = 3.82, Mode = 3), screening and identification procedures (M = 3.55, Mode = 3), and mentoring (M = 3.36, Mode = 3). Finally, the result for professor training (M = 2.55, Mode = 2) was the characteristic with the greatest room for improvement for most of the schools.

These results show that most of the universities are employing program components that are the same as most of the nine characteristics of good gifted programs. Most notably, all but one honors programs we studied did not have any formal teacher training or preparation for instructors prior to their working in the honors programs.

EXAMPLES OF THE NINE CHARACTERISTICS

Our investigation revealed that some programs demonstrated excellence with respect to one or more of the characteristics. In an effort to provide honors programs with information on how they can improve aspects of their programs in order to better meet their students' needs, the following section describes the exemplary characteristics we discovered in the Big 12 schools.

Interdisciplinary Approach to Learning

Rather than simply incorporating an interdisciplinary component into some of the honors courses, the students at one school are majors in a selective, four-year interdisciplinary arts and sciences program. The program begins with a broad core curriculum in the students' first two years and is followed by a more flexible course of study in the last two years. This school's commitment to providing an interdisciplinary approach to learning distinguishes it from other programs in the conference.

Nonclassroom Options

One program outperforms other programs in providing students with nonclassroom options in that there are extensive opportunities for real-world study and community service. According to their website, honors students at this school participate in independent studies, study-abroad programs, special

presentations, field trips, and a community service option. The community service option allows students in their sophomore and junior years to work with an area organization in exchange for course credit. In order to receive credit, students must be observed and supervised by faculty. This program provides an outstanding example of an approach that provides students with a hands-on and challenging honors experience.

Independent Studies

Consistently, when a program formulates its curriculum around one of these characteristics, the program seems to be much more effective at providing students with an opportunity in that area. The honors program at one school encourages its students to engage in independent research with an individual faculty member. Additionally, there are specific courses designed to provide students with an opportunity to pursue their independent interests. For example, an Independent Readings and Research course is available to students in their junior and senior years.

Students Involved in Their Own Curriculum Development

One honors program makes a special attempt to involve students in their own curriculum development through special advising sessions that encourage students to stretch their intellectual muscle and be fully involved in their education. While other programs do not seem to focus on the importance of student autonomy within an honors program, this program allows its students a great deal of freedom in their curriculum choices.

Screening and Identification Procedures

Most schools' screening and identification procedures consist of examining potential honors students' SAT or ACT scores, high school class ranks, and extracurricular activities. While these criteria for identification are acceptable, using only these measures can define honors' students as an extremely homogeneous group. One program broadens its selection to include honors students' self-reported individual strengths, thus adding diversity to the program's student population. The formal application procedure considers the following aspects of a student's suitability: class rank, standardized test scores, required high school units, extracurricular activity information, student-written essays, letters of recommendation, and special circumstances (e.g. family's socioeconomic status, cultural background). By considering aspects other than high school grades and test scores, this program provides a broader and more equitable admissions process.

Mentoring

Most of the honors program websites mentioned that mentoring was a focus of their programs, but one university highlights the mentorship process involved in students' research with faculty members. Research opportunities occur throughout the various curricular components of the program in order to offer students an opportunity to connect with one or more faculty members in the students' department. Another university matches Honors College students (usually upperclassmen) with incoming freshmen and sophomores who are either admitted to the Honors College or are eligible to join.

Evaluation of the Program

There is great variety in the honors program evaluations among the Big XII conference universities. Many of the programs engage in course evaluations, and some of them solicit information from current or graduating students, but one honors college goes over and above the typical. According to a representative of the program, yearly, merit-based evaluations affect the pay raises of staff and personnel. Further, all graduating students are asked to complete an evaluation form upon exiting the program. Additionally, online surveys are available, and these are completed at a response rate of approximately 75%. From these online surveys, the program's staff learned that the number one request of honors students was to increase the availability of upper-level honors courses. Obviously, schools that do not administer these types of surveys or questionnaires do not become privy to some of the needs of their students. In addition to the evaluation processes already mentioned, this university also conducts annual evaluations, the results of which are supplied to the dean of the college. Not only do they already do an excellent job of monitoring and evaluating themselves, but they are currently lobbying for the funding that would allow them to pay for an external evaluation of their program in order to obtain an outside perspective. This outside perspective can certainly be provided by NCHC evaluators using the procedures outlined by the NCHC.

Guidance Support for Students

Many of the honors colleges we examined attend to more than just the academic needs of their students. They also address the students' social and emotional needs. One such program provides students with exemplary social, career, and emotional guidance during their tenure in the program. Their students have the opportunity to live within a community of scholars. This building houses approximately 400 honors students and serves as the focal point of honors activities at this school. According to their website, this Residence

Center also houses program administrators, faculty offices, classrooms, conference rooms, computer labs, study rooms, and lounge areas open to all honors program students. This type of close contact with faculty and staff ensures that honors students at this school have many opportunities to seek guidance outside of the classroom.

Teacher Training

Of the nine characteristics of exemplary honors programs, teacher training was the feature most commonly neglected. In fact, only one school had rules regarding instructor training. Their *Guide for Honors Faculty* contain*s* information for faculty about how to teach an honors class. The first section outlines the goal of the program. The second section is titled *Chief Characteristics of Honors Courses* and talks about restricted enrollment, limited class size, student participation, communication skills improvements (for students), enrichment (rather than acceleration), hands-on learning, close interaction between student and professor, realistic grading, extensive independent work, and instruction by regular, tenure-track faculty members. The third section talks about the opportunities and rewards available to honors faculty (e.g. satisfaction of working with small classes, grant opportunities, award opportunities). The final section talks about how to schedule a new honors course. This type of thought and planning for teacher training should be practiced. It is unfortunate that knowledge of a subject area and generally good teaching skills seem to be the only criteria for teaching an honors course in many universities. These honors students do have unique needs that have helped them qualify for the program. Differentiation of curriculum should be based on those needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, those universities that host university-wide honors programs and colleges, as opposed to non-centralized programs, have well developed honors programs. It is also apparent that some universities invest more time and planning in their honors courses and programs than others.

Accordingly, we recommend that honors programs examine some exemplary program evaluation models and incorporate yearly evaluations of their programs. These plans should include formal evaluations conducted by outside evaluators on a regular basis, perhaps every three years. Additionally, honors programs and colleges should do the same with guidance programs. Particular problems of gifted and other very bright students (due to perfectionism, stress, or other causes) need to be addressed. Regular group help sessions should be conducted (at least for freshmen and sophomores) to help students adjust to the demands of the honors classes. Finally, there should be

some thought and planning for teacher training. Honors students have unique needs that have helped them qualify for the program. Differentiation of curriculum should be based on those needs. Many colleges have centers or programs aimed at improving instructor effectiveness. It is our recommendation that these centers be consulted in order to assist honors faculty better deal with the unique challenges of instructing exceptionally bright students.

FUTURE STUDIES

Further studies need to be conducted, such as interviews with graduates of these programs and with employers of the graduates and as well as studies of other universities besides the Big 12 conference schools. Publication of the results of some of the formal program evaluations might help other schools use empirical data to design or improve their honors programs.

Because some of the literature we cited mentioned that students who could not afford more expensive private schools benefited from honors programs, it would be interesting also to know how these honors programs compare to opportunities students have in major Ivy League and comparable elite universities. Students from each situation could be interviewed or case studies conducted to compare these experiences. As yet, no one has examined this question.

Finally, we will investigate the use of our ranking system survey to evaluate other honors programs besides those evaluated in this study. If this endeavor proves fruitful, this instrument might be used by individual programs as a supplement to their program evaluations.

Given that the majority of gifted learners matriculate to universities and take part in honors programs, this study provides information that will help to determine whether these honors programs are appropriate for gifted learners. Further, this study establishes that there is much variance among honors programs. This study points to the need for directors of honors programs to identify what is and what is not effective and to discuss *best practices* of honors programs. It is especially crucial for schools that might currently be losing their most academically promising students to institutions with better, more fully developed honors colleges and programs. This study is a beginning of an endeavor to develop an alternative evaluation system for honors programs that might be used as a supplement to the already established system of evaluation provided by the NCHC.

Figure 1. Ratings for the Nine Characteristics of Gifted Programs as Applied to Honors Programs

I. Interdisciplinary Approach to Teaching
   5. Program designed to be interdisciplinary
   4. More than courses are interdisciplinary
   3. Many of the courses are interdisciplinary
   2. Very little interdisciplinary curriculum
   1. No mention of interdisciplinary curriculum or courses

II. Non-classroom Options
   5. Numerous non-classroom options
   4. Some non-classroom options
   3. Stated they are there but are not delineated
   2. Unclear implementation
   1. Not available as part of the program

III. Independent Studies
   5. Essential and required part of the program
   4. Important part of the program
   3. Encouraged but not required
   2. Available as an assignment in class
   1. Not mentioned

IV. Students Involved in Their Own Curriculum Development
   5. Encourages students to be involved in planning their studies in and out of class and in choosing courses
   4. Student influence on syllabus and reading list in many classes
   3. Very little choice in curriculum
   2. Minimal choices in courses
   1. Prescribed course schedule

V. Screening and Identification Procedures
   5. Uses multiple criteria in a holistic approach to identification so that no one score or criteria can prevent inclusion in the program and also provides a systematic way to promote diversity
   4. Multiple criteria that allow for diverse learners
   3. Multiple criteria
   2. Limited criteria
   1. One score or criterion for inclusion in the program

VI. Mentoring

5. Mentors working individually with students on research and career goals
4. Students are given faculty mentors and many other advisors available
3. Close contact with faculty and staff of the program
2. Mentoring mentioned but not facilitated
1. Mentoring not mentioned as a special component of the program

VII. Program Evaluation

5. Systematic and complete external evaluation with some specified criteria such as the NCHC evaluation
4. Evaluation of professors, courses, ongoing evaluation of program
3. Course evaluation and survey
2. Course evaluation
1. No evaluation

VIII. Guidance and Support for Students

5. Organized program to counsel and guide students about personal as well as academic issue with special attention to social and emotional needs
4. Help with adjustment to college, orientation to Honors, advising, and identifying resources
3. Personal advising and informal time with professor
2. Academic advising
1. No formal advising

IX. Professor Training

5. Qualifications of instructors and formal training for professors before they can design and teach honors courses
4. Written information on guidelines for honors courses and qualifications of instructors
3. Qualifications for instructors
2. Department chooses instructors for honors courses
1. Instructor proposes honors courses

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