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Honors Culture Clash: The High Achieving Student Meets the Gifted Professor

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In "Defining Honors Culture," Charlie Slavin's statement that "[w]e surely all know students who are motivated, either by internal or external factors, but are not at all interested in taking risks or in stepping outside their comfort zone academically, socially, or culturally" reminded me of an annual discussion that I have at the national conference with Anne Rinn, an educational psychologist whose body of work includes research on how a postsecondary honors program may be a good fit for the high achieving student but perhaps not as good for the gifted student. During our 2004 panel on giftedness and honors, she distributed a handout with a modified version of the characteristics of these student groups as outlined by Janice Szabos in "Bright Child, Gifted Learner."

High Achievers	Gifted Students
Know the answers	Ask the questions
Are interested	Are curious
Have good ideas	Have wild or unexpected ideas
Understand ideas	Construct abstracts
Complete assignments	Initiate projects
Enjoy school	Enjoy learning
Are technicians	Are inventors
Grasp meaning	Draw inferences
Enjoy peers	Prefer adults
Learn with ease	Already know
Listen with interest	Demonstrate strong opinions
Absorb information	Manipulate information
Copy accurately	Create new designs
Are receptive	Are critical
Achieve mastery in 3–8 repetitions	Achieve mastery in 1–2 repetitions
Top group	Beyond the group

Because Anne and I each have both professional and personal experience with gifted education and honors programs, we are aware of such differences among student groups in our own programs. For example, I distribute the Szabos/Rinn list to the freshmen in my honors composition course at the beginning of the semester to stimulate class discussion about their perceptions of and expectations from university-level honors education; the high achievers tend to react as if they had missed out on yet another laurel to be added to their resumés, while the gifted students are more relaxed and accepting of the list.

Granted, the gifted and high achieving groups are not mutually exclusive, and a certain amount of overlap exists among many students, supporting our organizational belief that the idea/ideal of honors education in general and honors students in particular is not a monolithic construct but encompasses a wide variety of academic and social interests. Certain common features of contemporary honors programs, however, may benefit the high achiever more than the gifted student. For example, most programs have GPA requirements for admission and retention, and students may believe that certain characteristics of intellectual risk-taking from the gifted column above, such as having wild or unexpected ideas and demonstrating strong opinions, are less conducive to earning As than absorbing the information and knowing the answers. Likewise, required service components seem ideal for high achievers looking not only to give back to the community but also to add more activities to their already overflowing resumés; gifted students, however, tend to be more introverted and need more downtime, and they may be overwhelmed by balancing academics and service activities.

As educational psychologists continue to research differences among gifted and high achieving students, I find that I have become increasingly self-reflective about my own giftedness and its potential effects on my performance as a faculty member in an honors program. Regarding my teaching style, for instance, I have begun to draw inferences about my teaching evaluation scores for "ability to control emotions" in light of current research on overexcitability in gifted people. On occasion, for instance, I become openly incensed with inflexible or naïve comments that students make during class discussion. Granted, we all have such moments, and perhaps reading the research exacerbates my introspection, but I find that the frustration I experience in my regular courses, which usually stems from basic classroom management issues such as students text messaging during class or failing to submit assignments on time, is relatively mild compared to the palpable, hair-pulling exasperation I experience in my honors classes. Do I simply have higher expectations for my honors students, or am I influenced by being in a room with a group of overly excitable gifted people? Together do we create a more volatile class dynamic,

in turn causing frustration among the high achievers who simply want to complete the assignment, get the grade, and go on to their next classes?

Below are some other potential locations for the high achieving/gifted culture clash.

HAVE GOOD IDEAS/HAVE WILD OR UNEXPECTED IDEAS

My writing courses are not lecture courses; rather, I require a good deal of class discussion so that students can participate actively in developing their own rhetorical skills. According to my teaching evaluations, however, I sometimes have difficulty staying on track, usually when I have ten inspirations at once and have trouble articulating them in an organized fashion. Inevitably, two or three of these ideas are so off the wall that students roll their eyes as if to declare, "I can't believe she just said that!" My own proclivities not only place me outside the proverbial box but also lead me to kick it and jump up and down on it. This tendency has long been apparent in my own academic work, from a high school paper on the symbolism of the original *Star Wars* trilogy to a graduate school post-*Inferno* in-class presentation on ways to navigate the afterlife given in the guise of a travel agent. I occasionally rail at my high achievers not to write on the same clichéd topics that earned them As in high school and not to be so closed-minded in class about other people's professional, political, or personal beliefs; their previous successes with simply "good" ideas, however, make them reluctant to stray onto the wild or unexpected path and thus risk the extrinsic reward of what they perceive to be the guaranteed good grade.

ENJOY SCHOOL/ENJOY LEARNING

I will happily admit to my honors students that I did not earn a 4.0 during my undergraduate career but that I learned more from some of the classes in which I earned Bs than from those in which I earned easy As and then proceeded to forget all of the course material. Several of the items in the high achieving column above emphasize successfully jumping through academic hoops while more of the gifted items entail the kind of critical thinking that we constantly call for but do not always reward through the structures of our honors programs. A high school friend of mine, who spent our geometry classes drawing cars and eventually became an automotive engineer, scored a 32 on the ACT, earned a National Merit Scholarship, went to Washington University, and promptly failed his first calculus class because he did not know how to submit homework; I wonder how this gifted student would have fared in an honors program. Yes, many high achievers maintain a 4.0 GPA, but what did they retain from each of those courses? Did they drop courses in

which they were earning Bs so that they could maintain a high GPA? Did they avoid taking a variety of challenging electives for fear of failure? As an honors faculty member, I acknowledge the pressures on these students, but I also let them know that I am not afraid to be the professor who destroys their perfect GPAs. Some refuse to acknowledge that learning is a process, a life-long one at that, rather than a performance to earn a grade.

ABSORB INFORMATION/MANIPULATE INFORMATION

I tend to be postmodern in my pedagogical approach, operating from my discipline's transactionalist camp, which advocates the principle that written communication is bound up in the contextual variables in which the writer is creating the document. In my classes, therefore, there is no *one* right way but *several* right ways in which to complete assignments and conduct class discussions. The high achieving students complain that we never solve any problems in our discussions of complex topics, that no one ever wins the debate, to which I always reply that these are not debates but rather scholarly examinations in which we learn how to use a variety of rhetorical techniques. The gifted students and I tend to enjoy grappling with an unusual thesis or an outrageous proposal while the high achievers generally want to know the one right way to compose a research paper or have the right, i.e., winning, answer in the class discussion.

As educational psychologists and honors educators continue to explore these facets of high achieving and gifted subcultures within honors education, perhaps they could expand their studies beyond the students' characteristics to include those of the instructors and program directors who also participate in constructing our honors cultures. If differences among student groups create potential sites for culture clashes in the classroom, then does the ideation of the professor or the program director, who has a great deal of power in and responsibility for the classes and programs, contribute to such a clash? Does the gifted professor frustrate the high achieving student, and does the high achieving professor stifle or overwhelm the gifted student? I look forward to reading about what my colleagues may discover.

REFERENCE

Szabos, Janice. "Bright Child, Gifted Learner." *Challenge* 34 (1989): 27.

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