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The Tutorial Education Program: An Honors Program for Brazilian Undergraduate Students

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INTRODUCTION

The Tutorial Education Program is an honors program for Brazilian undergraduates, sponsored by the Ministry of Education. Based on philosophical principles of tutorial education in which small groups of academic talented students are guided by a tutor, the program is designed to support groups of undergraduates who demonstrate outstanding performance in their academic activities. The Tutorial Education Program provides enrichment activities in order to broaden the academic development of students with exceptional potential and abilities. Our purpose in this paper is to describe this honors program for undergraduates from different states in Brazil, focusing on the underlying philosophy of the program, its purposes, the main criteria for the selection of the students, how the program is organized and evaluated, the number of participating students, and universities that provide this program. As an illustration, the paper will also provide a brief presentation of how this program is conducted in the Institute of Psychology of the University at Brasilia, Brazil.

BACKGROUND

The advantages of providing programs for academically talented students have been increasingly recognized by governments and educators in different countries. One factor that explains this recognition is growing awareness of the benefits to countries that provide opportunities for their most capable students to develop their potential more fully. Kessler and Krejci, for example,

in a meeting of gifted education scholars from different countries that was organized by the World Council for the Gifted and Talented Children, remarked that human talent was Austria's most valuable resource in international competition and that measures should be taken to develop the most capable students.

The interest in academically talented students in Taiwan, according to Wu, arose from the understanding that an island with few natural resources needs to fully develop their human resources, including among them those students with outstanding intellectual potential, who should receive special attention. Similarly, Gallagher justifies the continued interest in the education of the most capable students in the United States by pointing out the need for a supply of highly talented students who can contribute to the country's leadership in higher education and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM-related areas). In the same vein, Weinert points out the increasing awareness, observed in several countries, of human abilities and talents as the most precious resources to nurture and benefit society.

A vast literature is available about the special characteristics and needs of the most capable students that should be fostered in order for them to develop their potential more fully (Alencar & Fleith; Colangelo & Davis; Fleith & Alencar; Heller, Mönks, Sternberg, & Subotnik; Horowitz, Subotnik, & Matthews; Shavinina; Van Tassel-Baska; Wallace & Eriksson). Although numerous strategies on how to educate capable students are described in the literature, most of the publications focus on services for talented students at the K–12 level, presenting a description of different types of enrichment and acceleration interventions in education that address these students' intellectual and social/emotional needs. Numerous studies have also been conducted on the academic and psychological benefits that result from children's participation in such acceleration or enrichment programs, but research on programs and services for academically gifted undergraduate students is comparatively scarce, or so it would seem in analysis of the literature on gifted education, including the best-known handbooks—such as those edited by Colangelo and Davis, Heller, Mönks, Sternberg and Subotnik, and Shavinina—as well as journals such as *Gifted Education International*, *Gifted and Talented International*, and *Gifted Child Quarterly*.

Among the programs for academically gifted undergraduates, however, one that deserves attention is the honors program, available to American students for a long time. According to Rinn and Plucker, Harvard University had special programs for honors students as early as 1873 and the University of Michigan as early as 1882; in 1922, Swarthmore College initiated an honors program that was the starting point for the most common types of honors

programs in higher education. Nowadays, many American colleges and universities offer honors programs to attend to the needs of academically talented undergraduate students (Hébert & McBee). These programs provide numerous opportunities for students to develop their potential, including (a) academic challenges in the form of honors courses and seminars; (b) extensive faculty contact; (c) interdisciplinary classes; (d) mentoring; (d) opportunities to participate in leadership activities and research; and (e) intellectually oriented extracurricular activities. However, little is known about honors programs for undergraduate students in countries other than the United States. The current study aims to contribute in this direction.

THE TUTORIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

In 1979, the Brazilian Department of Improvement of Graduate Personnel of the Ministry of Education initiated the Tutorial Education Program with fifteen students from two universities. This number has increased dramatically since then, and universities from all parts of the country have requested authorization to implement the program in some of their departments. The program is based on philosophical principles of tutorial education in which groups of four to twelve academically talented students are guided by a tutor. Its purpose is to support groups of undergraduate students who demonstrate outstanding performance in their academic activities as well as high potential and abilities by providing enrichment activities to broaden their academic development. The program, as defined in 2006, aims to: (a) offer academic and interdisciplinary activities of excellence, (b) improve college education, (c) prepare students to become highly qualified professionals, (d) supply students with opportunities to further develop higher-level thinking abilities as well as social responsibilities of citizenship, and (e) enhance teamwork abilities (Ministry of Education). Also, the activities implemented by the Tutorial Education Program are designed to strengthen the partnership between the university and society, favoring cooperative exchanges and mutual learning. The students should disseminate new ideas and practices among their academic peers and members of the community (Libâneo & Costa Jr.).

Undergraduate students are selected for this program during their second, third, or fourth semester at the university. The main criteria for selection are high academic achievement, high interest, and motivation in carrying out their studies. A professor is chosen as the mentor for each group and is responsible for planning activities and supervising the students. The mentor is selected from professors who demonstrate real interest in the program, high academic productivity, and a good relationship with colleagues and students. The program is evaluated each year. The students receive a scholarship and

THE TUTORIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM

remain in the program throughout their undergraduate program (Alencar, Fleith, & Arancibia). The tutor is also granted a scholarship.

The role of the tutor is (a) to plan and supervise the group activities and to guide students; (b) to coordinate the students' selection procedures; (c) to submit the group's annual activities proposal to the university and to the Ministry of Education; (d) to organize data and information about the group activities to substantiate the annual report to be sent to the Ministry of Education; (e) to dedicate a minimum of ten hours a week to the Tutorial Education Program; (g) to control students' attendance and participation; and (h) to account for funds received by the group (Ministry of Education [2006]).

Up to 2010, 4,274 students and 400 tutors from public and private universities located in different regions of Brazil have participated in the program (Ministry of Education [2012]). The program includes 428 groups of students in distinct fields of knowledge, e.g., business, engineering, economics, political science, statistics, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, education, architecture, the arts, and law. Each year higher education institutions may submit applications to the program. The Ministry of Education sponsors thirty new groups per year.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Tutorial Education Program, the Ministry of Education (2006) adopts the following indicators: (a) annual report of the group, (b) academic performance of students of the program, (c) students' involvement in activities and projects of the program, (d) improvement and innovation of educational practices at the undergraduate level, (e) students' publications and attendance at scientific events, (f) annual self-evaluation reports prepared by students and tutors of the program, and (g) visits of Ministry of Education delegates to the groups.

THE TUTORIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM AT THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHOLOGY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF BRASILIA

The current configuration of the Tutorial Education Program at the Institute of Psychology at the University of Brasilia includes twelve academically talented undergraduates. The students are expected to participate in the program for at least two years, after which they receive a Participation Certificate for the Tutorial Education Program that is issued by the Ministry of Education. When a student stays in the program for less than two years, he or she is entitled to receive only a statement of participation issued by the University of Brasilia.

The selection process is composed of three phases: (a) a school transcript evaluation, where the candidate must have a global grade average above the

70th percentile; (b) a written, knowledge-based test on the specific content of four fundamental areas of the course (personality, social behavior, learning, and developmental psychology), in which the candidate must earn at least 70 points out of 100; and (c) an oral exam, on which the student must also earn a grade of 70%, which assesses the student's availability, motivation, interest, and general knowledge. The Tutorial Education Program in Psychology conducts one selection process a year, with results valid for one year only; after that, another selective process is required.

The student requirements are the following: (a) to ensure the academic quality of the program; (b) to participate in all activities programmed by the tutor, including teaching, research, social, and community activities; (d) to have good academic performance in the undergraduate program; (e) to contribute to the professional development of classmates; and (f) to publish or present a scientific paper, individually or in group, each year.

In the specific case of the Institute of Psychology at the University of Brasilia, students engage in a scientific research project throughout the year. The students may elaborate and develop their own projects under the guidance of the tutor or other professor, or they may join a research team of a project that is already under development by another team of students and professor. Each project must annually generate a manuscript—a literature review or empirical study—to be submitted for publication in a journal of psychology or a related area. Independently of the research projects to which the students are committed, they each must attend a research seminar at the university, make an oral and public presentation, and present a paper in a scientific conference. Other student activities include workshops about themes of interest to the profession of psychology in Brazil, presentations and discussion of films, symposia about research themes in psychology, debates on polemical issues in psychology, and symposia on the professional development of undergraduate psychology students.

A student is removed from the Tutorial Education Program in Psychology in the following cases: (a) graduation, institutional suspension of registration, or withdrawal from the undergraduate program; (b) a personal decision to leave the program; (c) underachievement; (d) failing twice on subjects of the psychology undergraduate program; (e) non-compliance with the obligations assumed toward the university and the Ministry of Education; (f) failure to carry out the program duties; and (g) undertaking actions or involvement that are not consistent with the philosophy of the program or the University of Brasilia.

CONCLUSION

The commitment of the students who participate in the program is not only academic and professional but ethical and social as well. The focus of the program is to provide the holistic development of its participants. For developing countries like Brazil, investment in the education of academically talented students is essential, contributing to the improvement of the quality of life in the broader society. We must therefore continue to develop special programs like the Tutorial Education Program in order to meet the needs, interests, and abilities of future professionals and researchers. We must also develop studies on the short- and long-term effects of our program on the lives of those thousands who were part of it at some point in their academic journeys. The results would help us determine what should be changed and what new actions should be taken in order to keep alive the spirit of the program.

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