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Ways We Can Do Better: Bridging the Gap Between Gifted Education and Honors Colleges

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Over the past decade of my academic career, I have increasingly noticed the gap between K–12 gifted education and honors college education as my research has forced me to straddle the two areas. My doctoral education at Ball State University included a specialization in gifted studies, which was a natural fit with my own interests in creative cognitive processes. During this time, I worked with a team that amassed a large data set from the honors college students, with twelve different measures ranging from topics of temperament to perfectionism to social dominance orientation. These measures addressed mostly psychosocial and emotional constructs, which are important considerations within K–12 gifted education. However, as I first began presenting and publishing findings from this data set, I noticed a gap between the conceptualizations of elementary, middle, and secondary-level gifted education and the function of honors colleges within higher education. This disconnect was further illuminated through my work at the Indiana

University Center for Postsecondary Research, where I noticed that many of my colleagues from doctoral programs in higher education, in contrast to my own background in educational psychology, used different terminology to explain what seemed to be essentially parallel constructs. I also discovered extensive research on honors colleges and programs, which largely seemed to be separate from gifted education, i.e., published in different journals, presented at different conferences, and not often cited in one another's works.

Colangelo's essay in this issue, "Gifted Education to Honors Education: A Curious History, a Vibrant Future," presents an excellent description of many similarities between the two fields while Guzy's "Honors is a Good Fit for Gifted Students—Or Maybe Not" points out some of the distinctions we should keep in mind. Given the important points in these essays, along with my own personal experiences spanning the two fields, I have generated three general suggestions for how my fellow researchers might better address the disconnect between gifted and honors education.

SUGGESTION 1:

FIGURE OUT THE OVERLAP BETWEEN GIFTED STUDENTS AND HONORS STUDENTS

If we imagine an overlapping Venn diagram, with one circle representing gifted K–12 students and the other representing honors students, we can identify the kinds of information we have in the different areas and the extent of the overlap. In my research, we found that 92% of honors students reported some kind of previous participation in gifted programming during elementary, middle, and/or high school but reported wide variation in the types of programming. Some noted opportunities for accelerated courses, such as grade skipping or AP/early college credits, while others received more enrichment-based extracurricular experiences like Odyssey of the Mind, Future Problem Solving, or summer programs. We should examine certain types of gifted programming exposure that are over- or under-represented in the overlapping section of the Venn diagram and consider the demographic and personality characteristics of this group. We should then compare the overlapping features with what is already known about both gifted students and honors students.

We can also explore the parts of the circles that do not overlap, i.e., gifted students who do not end up in honors colleges, or honors students with no

prior gifted identification or programming experiences. If gifted students do not go on to an honors college, we can explore their potential options. Since honors colleges tend to be more prominent at large and/or public universities, perhaps these non-honors gifted students choose more selective or smaller private schools instead, where their academic experiences might or might not be comparable to those at honors colleges. Alternatively, students might want to explore their giftedness within a particular domain and opt for an independent college of art and design or chose to study engineering at an independent technical university. Gifted students might decide against honors college enrollment even if it is available at their institution because they feel that they are not well-prepared or that honors will threaten their perfect GPA or their self-identity as “the smart kid,” i.e., the big-fish-little-pond effect. In the case of gifted underachievers, who are also more likely to be part of disadvantaged minorities, they may decide against higher education altogether.

Non-gifted honors students might also provide insight into the functioning and effectiveness of honors colleges. We can identify the characteristics that have allowed these students to succeed. Perhaps we can confirm that students from more privileged backgrounds rely on their social capital to garner the grades, test scores, and other criteria necessary to gain admission to honors programs. Assuming that a certain amount of motivation or work ethic contributes to the success of these students, we can examine whether their motivation is more extrinsic, i.e., “Honors College participation will look good on my résumé,” or intrinsic, i.e., “I am really interested in X topic, so studying this in depth with professor Y for my honors thesis sounds like fun.” More research on the characteristics of gifted honors students, non-gifted honors students, and gifted non-honors students, along with a better terminology scheme than what I have clumsily devised here, would be an important step forward in bridging the gap.

SUGGESTION 2:

BETTER APPLICATION OF GIFTED THEORIES AND FINDINGS WITHIN HONORS RESEARCH (AND PRACTICE)

Honors colleges place a strong emphasis on describing and assessing the curricular experiences and requirements of their students in order to demonstrate the effectiveness of this type of resource-extensive programming, especially as budgets within higher education continue to shrink. On the

flip side, however, the knowledge from gifted education that homes in on the social and emotional needs of gifted children seems to be a tangential consideration among honors colleges. As Marylou Kelly Streznewski emphasized in her book *Gifted Grownups*, a student does not simply stop being gifted upon turning eighteen years old. The unique needs of the gifted are still there when the students start college. Gifted researchers have explored many constructs to better address the social and emotional issues of gifted children, and honors colleges should take note of these in order to improve the experiences of their students. Such considerations are especially pertinent to honors colleges that have specially designated residence halls or living-learning communities where students continue to interact with one another outside the classroom. Within gifted studies is a plethora of research on topics such as overexcitability, social coping, perfectionism, personality traits, mental health, self-efficacy, identity, relationship styles, and parenting styles. If the findings from K–12 populations can be replicated in honors college populations, programming can be better adapted to serve them. If not, the differences might be explained by the Venn diagram described above or might result from different developmental levels. Perhaps the honors college environment can be a significant social and emotional benefit for gifted students, providing a community of like-minded individuals whom they have never been able to access before.

Gifted children need to be prepared for what lies ahead of them as adults, not only in their academic and career pursuits but also in their social and personal experiences. Educators and administrators should not ignore the non-academic needs of honors college students simply because they are officially “adults” now. Instead, a holistic understanding of gifted individuals, including their social and emotional lives, can be addressed through programming and services in honors colleges, perhaps demonstrating whether the enhanced curriculum and learning experiences, or the concurrent social aspects of honors participation, contribute positively to their cognitive and affective states. Such exploration would be beneficial in determining whether there are longer-term impacts of such experiences that extend into adulthood, as well as giving honors students tools to address potential social and emotional issues once they graduate and venture out on their own.

SUGGESTION 3: MORE COMPARISONS BETWEEN HONORS AND NON-HONORS COLLEGE STUDENTS

K–12 education has a decided advantage in the availability of data from students of all ability levels. As much as we bemoan the prominence of standardized testing, it does allow us access to an easily identified “non-gifted” group for comparison purposes. Longitudinal data can provide information on academic increases, decreases, and stasis while holding constant other characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. However, once students begin higher education, they rarely receive this kind of ability-based assessment, so we do not have comparable data for all students. Much of the existing research on honors college students can only provide comparisons to non-honors students on metrics like GPA, retention, or graduation rates that are available for all students. Similarly, honors colleges do not have a “gifted identification” process although they do have criteria for admission.

If we wish to demonstrate the effectiveness of honors colleges as well as identify areas for improvement, we need a sample of non-honors students for comparison, without which the research on honors education is siloed. While comparison is not impossible, it requires cross-campus coordination. Offices of institutional research and assessment could be a great resource for gaining the necessary information as they generally house data that can serve for comparisons. Some institutions administer writing competency exams or major field exams, and these offices could merge honors college participation with demographics, entrance exam scores (SAT/ACT), and the like.

The NCHC is taking a proactive step in addressing the gap between gifted and honors education by partnering with the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). My current work involves research and data analysis for this project, and NSSE contains a wealth of information that might be useful for honors college educators and administrators. A recent special issue of *Journal for the Education of the Gifted* focusing on honors college students featured some findings that compared honors and non-honors students on indicators of engagement such as reflective and integrative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive environments within a sub-sample of participating institutions. The 2019 consortium between the NCHC and NSSE provides an opportunity to administer additional items on topics of interest. Administration of NSSE to all first-year and senior students at a participating

institution will generate a wealth of data for comparisons between honors and non-honors students. The results from this collaboration should be shared with both the gifted and honors communities for optimal awareness.

REFERENCE

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