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If Not Us, Who? If Not Now, When?

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Last year's surprise hit of the television season was *The Good Doctor*, in which Freddie Highmore plays a gifted surgical resident who is also a high-functioning autistic. Critics speculate that it succeeded because audiences are hungry for good-outcome fantasy, or "warm bath" television. Fantasy is right. As much as we love watching Shaun Murphy show up not only all the other residents but all the attending physicians, we wouldn't want to work with him in real life. Gifted students who can move through the K–12 curriculum so quickly that they can earn college-ready SAT scores at 11 or 12 are a prickly annoyance after elementary school, and many of them, especially boys, are outright casualties of the secondary school environment. They may sabotage their chances for admission to colleges that could challenge them—through poor attendance, low grades, and issues with authority, making an early exit from the educational system to excel as entrepreneurs or perhaps deliver pizza until they eventually succeed without a formal education or go back to school years later. In college, they are reluctant to enter yet another honors environment where they expect to be chased around with a

“potentiometer.” How can they know that college is not high school—that, in college, they can do undergraduate research, take classes that are actually hard, and develop intellectual relationships with their professors that are truly collegial and rooted in mutual respect?

You might think that gifted students are a natural fit for honors education, and they are, but they are nevertheless a marginalized minority because they are not always high achievers, their behavior is hard to predict or measure, and extrinsic motivators don’t work well with them; it is hard to justify giving them money or a scarce slot in a program with competitive admission unless they have a solid track record of proven academic success rather than just a glittering pile of test scores indicating amazing potential but little to no accomplishment. Honors programs tend to steer admission away from high test scores and low grades because high grades and class ranking do predict college success, at least early on. Yet we also recognize that honors programs have historically experienced high attrition and problems with student persistence. One of the wickedest of all wicked dilemmas for honors is whether we can predict performance from potential.

Would you want Shaun Murphy in your honors program? What about his profound intellectual gifts suggests that, in the real world, he would be able to survive college, medical school, and residency to become a “good doctor”? Would he come back to tell you later that your honors program opened up to him a world of intellectual acceptance that permitted him to flourish rather than be forced, as Colangelo suggests, to bury his talents? That a high-functioning autistic could navigate medical school successfully is fiction. In the real world, adolescents as gifted as Shaun typically suffer a profound inner conflict between accepting their divergence from the norm and abandoning it in favor of perceived social acceptance. Some learn to imitate conventional thinking and keep their real ideas to themselves, but others withdraw completely or make riveting YouTube videos that tell their stories to thousands of strangers or put their gifts into activities like gaming that keep them stimulated but, in the end, lead nowhere.

True giftedness, as the “trait” model described by Colangelo suggests, is temperamental; it exists with or without matching achievement. A definition crafted by the Columbus Group in 1991, which is cited by the National Association for Gifted Children, asserts: “Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity.” Janice

Szabos's legendary "Bright Child/Gifted Learner" chart from a 1989 article in *Challenge* magazine, which Annmarie Guzy has included in her article "Honors Is a Good Fit for Gifted Students—Or Maybe Not," is the anecdotal double helix within gifted education for understanding how gifted children differ profoundly from their age peers and approximate adult intelligence in ways that IQ tests have sought for over a century to measure. Bright children become normal adults with high intelligence. Gifted children become gifted adults with associated temperamental traits. Deirdre V. Lovecky, in "Can You Hear the Flowers Sing? Issues for Gifted Adults," summarizes these traits as *divergency* (unusual and strikingly creative thinking), *excitability* (along with the ability to stay focused on a task for an exceptional length of time), *sensitivity* (coupled with a powerful sense of justice), *perceptivity* (including the ability to see situations in multiple layers), and *entelechy*, a goal-directed inner strength so powerful that it attracts others to your flame. These temperamental traits are rarely if ever captured in any of the measures that we use to identify candidates for honors although we recognize them in our academic leaders, in our colleagues and, often, in ourselves.

In *The Good Doctor*, the dramatic conflict centers on the efforts of other doctors to socialize Murphy so that he can communicate with them and with patients in ways that conform to accepted norms. Although he is an extreme case because he is also autistic (and perhaps Sheldon Cooper is a less extreme example), social interaction is difficult for Murphy because of the asynchrony between his cognitive and emotional development and his social development. Gifted students may or may not be good members of an honors community. Some, like the characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, welcome the opportunity to be in a group of people like themselves as is well documented in the literature on gifted education for the young, which demonstrates decisively that gifted children do best in enhanced programs with other gifted children. Other gifted students are lone wolves, intellectual bullies, or high-maintenance divas. They are also prone to mood disorders and behavior disorders, some of which may be crippling.

Knowing the characteristics attributed by Lovecky (and Szabos before her) to the gifted, e.g., divergent thinking coupled with irrepressible intellectual excitability, or great persistence coupled with an exaggerated awareness of social injustice, would you want them in your honors program? If you did want them, and you decided to set aside a few spaces through holistic admission to take a flyer on some of them, how would you find them so you could invite them to Heaven? As Colangelo and Guzy both remind us, college

honors programs do not have robust relationships with the programs for gifted children in the educational systems surrounding them, and although they know a great deal about how to meet the needs of high achievers, most honors directors have little or no training in educational strategies for dealing with the gifted.

Elementary and middle schools know quite well who the gifted students are, especially the troublemakers who are smarter than their teachers and have less impulse control than their age peers and especially when they are driven to speak up against incorrectness or injustice. The Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth and other similar organizations help find these students nationally by offering elementary and middle schoolers an opportunity to take any of several well-validated standardized tests designed for students who are much older. If their verbal and quantitative reasoning skills are advanced enough at 11 or 12 for them to do well on these tests, they are ready to do college work—at least some of it. Sadly, that work is six years away, and the road to it is loaded with IEDs that explode if they do not suffer fools gladly or respect authority when the respect is unearned. The good news is that the cultural bias of some of these standardized tests is also greatly lessened when they are administered to the highly academically talented or to children.

But honors programs generally don't recruit in elementary schools, even though most gifted children are also high achievers *in elementary school*. One of the more reliable definitions of intelligence is the number of repetitions needed for learning. At about third grade, when the work becomes harder because it depends on mastery of grade-level reading and mathematical concepts, instruction slows to a crawl to accommodate those whose intelligence is not superior. It is easy for gifted children, if they are not only not challenged but actively bored, to lose interest in school and for their teachers to lose patience with them, especially if they are disruptive. Unlike the students who decide not to do honors because they perceive it to be more work, these children are *begging* for more work—anything but another repetition of the same work, the same questions, the same answers.

NCHC's Education of the Gifted Special Interest Group has long advocated for a place for the gifted in honors programs because these students need gifted and talented programs in college just as they need them at every other level. If not us, who will provide an appropriate college education for them? They are driven and creative. They are the risk-takers, whereas hard-working high achievers tend to be risk-averse. They are the ones who desperately want small, discussion-based classes, a chance to tackle complex,

difficult problems, and opportunities for collaborative research with working scholars and undergraduate research of their own. Everything about our curricula is designed for them. If the gifted are anything, they are persistent, and attrition rates in honors suggest that the kinds of students we now recruit tend to be more successful in the first two years, when most honors programs replace the general education curriculum with a richer version of itself, and less successful when the responsibility for learning shifts over to the student and professors become the gatekeepers, not the source of new knowledge.

Wide-ranging and holistic admissions strategies are essential in finding all the different kinds of students who might be successful in honors programs, especially gifted underachievers, so it is heartening to hear Colangelo contend that a partnership between the NCHC and the National Association for Gifted Children—in fact, with the entire complex network of educational resources for gifted children and their teachers—can be beneficial to us both. Honors educators can learn from experts in gifted education for the young about identification for academic success. We already know that the current measures of academic potential that we use to recruit honors students from among high school students are not particularly good predictors of success. The best predictor of success in college is *success in college*. According to the NCHC Admissions, Retention, and Completion Survey, students entering honors programs as transfers or internal late admits come in with a mean college GPA of 3.65, well above the mean GPA of 3.29 required to remain in most honors programs although their ACT and SAT scores are below those of students admitted as full-time first-year students. However, a potentially more accurate predictor of college success than high achievement in high school might actually be high achievement in K–5 programs.

Giftedness is particularly conspicuous in the early years. IQ tests measure the ability of a child to approximate adult behavior, so they are most accurate when used to identify young children who are capable of performing cognitive tasks that prove difficult even for adults. Ample anecdotal evidence suggests that giftedness manifests itself clearly in children because it is rare in the general population. Some children can do complex mathematics, play musical instruments like the violin, draw accurately, play games like chess that require cognitive sophistication, or perform athletic tasks like gymnastics or ballet that require coordination and artistry. Educational systems throughout the world use early identification measures to capture all kinds of giftedness. China became a world power in Olympic sports by identifying children who were athletically gifted, assigning them to sports to which their heredity

predisposed them, and dedicating their education to the pursuit of excellence in that one area. The problem with this strategy, of course, is that intrinsic motivation is necessary to persistence, and the gifted are notorious for their relentless pursuit of topics that interest them to the exclusion of topics that don't interest them, no matter how much these topics interest other people such as professors or academic publishers. Steve Jobs famously dropped out of Reed after a semester so that he could spend the next eighteen months sitting in on only the classes he wanted to take. The very existence of an array of extrinsic motivators used to lure high achievers into honors programs and keep them there—money, perks, prestige, leadership opportunities—suggest that, while depending on proven achievement to predict future achievement, honors programs and colleges are not relying on intrinsic motivation to attract students to honors programs and retain them.

The issue of social justice would also suggest the value of recruiting for high-ability students in the lower grades. The measures used to identify gifted children work fairly well across all kinds of ethnic and socioeconomic populations because they identify traits that are innate, and they can identify academically talented low-income children, those from marginalized populations, or those whose parents did not attend college. The gifted among these populations have no idea what college even is, but if they did, they might begin to pursue a value-added college education when they were very young. Gifted elementary and middle schoolers could be permitted to get a glimpse of college through extracurricular adventures in science, game design, historical reenactment, crime scene investigation, musical theatre, and other higher-order and complex subjects, which honors programs could run for them. Both public and private institutions could induce their local academic superstars to stay home by reaching out to them while they are still in the lower grades and becoming a haven for them as they move through an educational system that “drags its slow length along” interminably. These students need to keep on the move intellectually even if they still have to sit through high school. We can give them entrée into the magical world of higher learning so they can know what lies ahead.

The real stumbling block to all of this visionary thinking is the discrepancy between the way we measure our own success and the way our success tends to be measured by the universities in which our programs reside. Honors programs have a disproportionately high cost per participant relative to the university's overall per-student cost, and universities are understandably concerned about whether they can recoup this investment either in real

money or in free publicity and intangible assets such as goodwill. Honors directors are especially conscious of the extra pressure that exists in the complex world of recruiting for student success when the success of the recruiters depends on their ability to predict future performance with accuracy. It is easy to justify selecting recruits with a proven track record of success in secondary school but hard to justify selecting recruits, even those with measurable potential who have already been identified as gifted children, when their recent track record on performance measurables like grades falls short of what their potential measurables promised.

Still, honors programs exist to educate our future leaders. If they admit gifted students who have demonstrated themselves to be high achievers at a point in the educational system when high achievement meant creativity, intellectual initiative, and a sophisticated understanding of complex topics, then they enhance the likelihood of admitting students who will create new knowledge rather than repackaging what is already known. The twenty-first century is full of wicked problems that need solving, and it is moving fast. We need minds that move fast, minds that can capture the interdisciplinary complexity of global issues using tools that may be obsolete in a few months and need to be replaced by new tools that someone will have to invent. If honors programs don't provide a place where people with these minds have an opportunity to educate themselves, forcing them to be internet autodidacts, we will have failed in the very purpose for which we exist. In the famous quotation that seems to have had its source in Rabbi Hillel but that has been widely used and misattributed since the first century BC: "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

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YARRISON

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