

Honors Is a Good Fit for Gifted Students—Or Maybe Not

Annmarie Guzy

University of South Alabama

In the field of composition studies, a core pedagogical objective is to familiarize students with types of argumentation strategies, such as causation, evaluation, narration, rebuttal, and definition. Introducing definition arguments in their textbook *Good Reasons: Researching and Writing Effective Arguments*, Lester Faigley and Jack Selzer state that “[d]efinition arguments set out criteria and then argue whatever is being defined meets or does not meet those criteria. Rarely do you get far into an argument without having to define something” (97). They identify three categories of definition—formal, operational, and by example—and then apply these to sample documents.

For my honors composition course, I begin class discussion of definitional argument by writing this thesis statement on the board: “Honors programs are not a good fit for gifted students.” Initially, students are resistant: “Aren’t gifted and honors the same thing?” “Don’t all gifted students go into honors anyway?” I explain that we must examine definitions for gifted and honors to identify the similarities and differences, not only in intellectual ability but in other areas such as motivation and emotionality. I also admit to them that the idea that gifted students might not naturally fit into honors had not occurred to me until I attended Anne Rinn’s 2004 NCHC conference session, “Should Gifted Students Join an Honors Program?” Rinn acknowledged a lack of empirical research supporting the premise that gifted students fit well into honors programs and used her dissertation as an occasion to contribute needed empirical support in favor of their joining.

To guide class discussion, I provide a series of extended definitions from the literature about honors and gifted education. First, to establish a professional baseline idea of what honors is, I take them to the NCHC website to examine the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program” and “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College.” Next, I show them a modified version of Janice Szabos’s “Bright Child, Gifted Learner” table distributed by Jonathan Kotinek during his 2004 NCHC conference session, “Gifted & Honors: Is There a Difference?”

| <u>High Achievers</u> | <u>Gifted Students</u> |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 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 | Achieve mastery in 1-2 |

repetitions

repetitions

Top group

Beyond the group

Initially, many of my honors students resist the possibility that these traits are diametrically opposed because most were in gifted programs themselves, so they argue in favor of an overlapping Venn diagram or a sliding Likert scale rather than a strictly defined dichotomy. I counter, however, that they are gifted students who self-selected into honors, and many of them know gifted siblings, relatives, or friends who elected not to participate in honors. We then discuss specific traits from the “Gifted Students” column that might make these other students less inclined to participate in honors; for example, “have wild or unexpected ideas” may not produce a publishable seminar paper, conference presentation, or thesis project.

Next, we review the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) webpage on “Traits of Giftedness” (see Appendix). The four main categories include not simply cognitive traits but also creative, affective, and behavioral traits. In student terms, this means not just being super-smart but also thinking in different kinds of ways and having emotional and behavioral traits that may not contribute to success in honors. For example, many of the table’s affective and behavioral traits can also be found in Susan Cain’s book-length definition of introversion, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*. From the point of view of the extroverted, high-achieving honors student (or administrator or faculty member), the introverted gifted student who wants to sit quietly in the back of the room or who avoids community service projects and social gatherings may seem anti-social or lazy.

In his essay “Gifted Education to Honors Education: A Curious History, a Vibrant Future,” prominent gifted education scholar Nicholas Colangelo identifies three takeaways from his early experiences as a gifted educator. First, he notes that gifted students “chose to

deliberately earn lower grades and did not answer questions in class so that they would not be ostracized by their classmates as brains or nerds.” High-achieving students may have no problem being perceived as the teacher’s pet, but members of the NCHC Education of the Gifted SIG, including the SIG co-chair Betsy Yarrison, have frequently identified this purposeful academic underachievement as one of the barriers preventing gifted students from applying to or being successful in postsecondary honors programs. Second, Coleangelo states that teachers “took subtle and not so subtle swipes at their students’ intelligence. Comments by teachers such as ‘Of course you should know the answer to this question, you are gifted’ were not viewed as compliments, nor were they meant to be. What these students figured out was that in a school setting, it was not always smart to be smart.” Such swipes are also detrimental to the gifted student’s emotional well-being, as seen in the “Traits of Giftedness” Affective column items on “unusual emotional depth and intensity,” “heightened self-awareness, accompanied by feelings of being different,” and “easily wounded, need for emotional support.” Gifted education specialists are aware of these traits, but honors educators who come from academic disciplines across campus may not be as familiar with ways to meet gifted students’ unique emotional needs. Third, Coleangelo argues that gifted students were “ready to learn more complex material and at a faster pace, but the curriculum did not allow for such customizing. Educators felt that students in the same grade should take the same curriculum.” As evidenced by NCHC’s recent battles over accreditation, we in honors argue steadfastly that we are open to a wide range of curricular approaches, but we seem to be heading toward a somewhat more cookie-cutter checklist of what constitutes an honors curriculum than we might care to admit: honors versions of general education courses, check; lower-division electives, check; upper-division seminars, check; capstone/thesis projects, check. As noted in the table above, high achievers who “Complete

assignments” and “Enjoy school” may feel a sense of accomplishment in meeting these goals, but gifted students may bristle at what they interpret as uncreative educational constraints. Through these three takeaways, we can gain a better understanding of some of the underlying differences between gifted and honors.

The first half of the title of Colangelo’s essay, “Gifted Education to Honors Education,” identifies a separation of the two terms while subtly implying a transition from one to the other. For decades, we have seen this shift in labeling from “gifted” to “honors” take place during a child’s K-16 educational career, a shift that extends to curricular strategies as well. Early childhood and elementary education allow for identifying and providing enrichment activities for gifted children, but opportunities for pull-out classes and IEPs begin to taper off in middle school. By the time a gifted child reaches high school, the “creative and different” gifted program model has been replaced by the “more material at a faster pace” honors coursework model, which has recently been subsumed in turn by the assessment-driven AP and IB models, where high achievers may thrive but gifted students may become disinterested and disengaged.

I navigated this transition from grade school and middle school gifted enrichment to high school and college honors programs, and as a student I had simply assumed that this was an intellectual “growing up.” During the first year of my master’s program in composition studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, I took a seminar on basic writing, and I was introduced to medical-style education terminology, such as *remedial* students being *diagnosed* with learning *disabilities*. This clinical language reminded me of jargon I had heard at gifted meetings, so I began to do research on gifted education, building a layperson’s familiarity with resources such as NAGC, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, and various texts geared toward teachers, counselors, and parents of gifted children. During this time, I also began my first teaching

assistantship, and the first composition course I taught at SIUE back in 1992 was an honors section for students admitted to the school's honors program. Using my newfound resources, I constructed a special topics section titled "The Gifted Experience," divided the semester into units on labeling, family, education, and special needs, incorporating readings such as "The Abdication of Childhood" by Nicholas Colangelo and Colette Fleuridas.

As I moved on to my doctoral program in rhetoric and professional communication at New Mexico State University, I was required to take three courses in an outside specialization. Because I had decided to write my dissertation on honors composition, I took graduate courses on gifted education that familiarized me with the basic history, legislation, research, and practice in the field. I also interned with our campus Preschool for the Gifted. On the admissions testing day, I had flashbacks to my own similar tests in kindergarten, ones that I had thought were simply games played with the school district's psychologist. My colleagues in educational psychology can recite the names of specific instruments with more facility than I, but observing and remembering tests reinforced the fact that giftedness is not simply about IQ scores but also about creativity, curiosity, and emotional intensity.

Many of my honors composition students experience similar "a-ha" moments while discussing the NAGC "Traits of Giftedness" table. Eyes grow wide, fingers point, and pens scribble furiously. For some, the discussion becomes less about how to define honors and gifted and more about how to define themselves. Honors educators need to ask ourselves the same questions: when considering whether and how to increase recruitment and retention efforts to include more gifted students, how do we define ourselves? Philosophically, we claim to serve bright, motivated students, but we may not offer educational opportunities that gifted students want or need. Peruse the student tracks from our recent conferences, and you will see

presentations and posters that favor the risk-averse high achievers who know how to craft submissions that will be safely accepted. Listen to nominations for Student of the Year, and hear a recitation of academic, leadership, and service achievements more than individual traits. We argue that honors is more than numbers, quantitative admissions criteria, and four-year graduation rates, but we may also be marching students through a rigidly structured honors curriculum in rigidly constructed cohorts rather than allowing for the asynchronous development so commonly seen among gifted students.

So what is honors? Honors is the Socratic circle—in which the gifted introvert chooses not to participate. Honors is the experiential learning activity—which the gifted student avoids because he dislikes interaction with his age cohort. Honors is the community service leadership opportunity—which doesn't interest the gifted student who prefers to spend quiet time alone in her room with her studies or her hobbies. Honors is the research-based capstone project—which the gifted student refuses to complete because the mini-master's requirements are too restrictive and the prospective disciplinary topics are too boring. If honors professionals are earnest in our desire to recruit and retain more gifted students, then we need to reexamine how we define honors education in the twentieth-first century and how we should expand our definitions to more fully embrace intellectual diversity.

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The author may be contacted at aguzy@southalabama.edu.

Appendix: National Association for Gifted Children’s “Traits of Giftedness”

| Cognitive | Creative | Affective | Behavioral |
|--|--|--|--|
| Keen power of abstraction | Creativeness and inventiveness | Unusual emotional depth and intensity | Spontaneity |
| Interest in problem-solving and applying concepts | Keen sense of humor | Sensitivity or empathy to the feelings of others | Boundless enthusiasm |
| Voracious and early reader | Ability for fantasy | High expectations of self and others, often leading to feelings of frustration | Intensely focused on passions—resists changing activities when engrossed in own interests |
| Large vocabulary | Openness to stimuli, wide interests | | Highly energetic—needs little sleep or down time |
| Intellectual curiosity | Intuitiveness | Heightened self-awareness, accompanied by feelings of being different | Constantly questions |
| Power of critical thinking, skepticism, self-criticism | Flexibility | Easily wounded, need for emotional support | Insatiable curiosity |
| Persistent, goal-directed behavior | Independence in attitude and social behavior | Need for consistency between abstract values and personal actions | Impulsive, eager and spirited |
| Independence in work and study | Self-acceptance and unconcern for social norms | | Perseverance—strong determination in areas of importance |
| Diversity of interests and abilities | Radicalism | Advanced levels of moral judgment | High levels of frustration—particularly when having difficulty meeting standards of performance (either imposed by self or others) |
| | Aesthetic and moral commitment to self-selected work | Idealism and sense of justice | Volatile temper, especially related to perceptions of failure |
| | | | Non-stop talking/chattering |

Source: www.nagc.org