

A NARRATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE EXPERIENCE
OF EARLY ENTRANCE TO COLLEGE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the question “what is it like to be a gifted early college entrant?” Participants were eight college graduates between the ages of 23 and 45 who matriculated to college as full-time, degree-seeking students at age 16. This was a qualitative study conducted by open-ended interview and utilized narrative inquiry as a framework for the analysis. Participant responses were coded and analyzed using constant comparative method. Coded responses were grouped into 40 subcategories which were further collapsed into 7 overarching categories that provide a framework for understanding the experience of early college entrance: life story; being exceptional; understanding exceptionality through others’ experience; transition to college, academic preparation, performance, and experience; getting involved and pursuing interests; and social-emotional awareness and agency. These categories provide a picture of the milieu in which participants made the decision to enter college early.

Results of this study suggest that participants experienced a milieu of educational experiences, including academic acceleration, and embedded social-emotional contexts that increased their academic self-concept and precipitated early college entrance. Despite failing to recognize their own giftedness and experiencing academic struggle, participants successfully completed college and embarked on meaningful careers. Interpreting giftedness as asynchronous development provides a framework for these results. The results of the present study suggest that while the native cognitive ability of

a gifted early entrant might be sufficient to complete college, additional social-emotional supports are needed to fully realize the academic potential of gifted students.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Ashley, and sons, Noah and Samuel.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In an October 1971 letter referring to a report on the education of the gifted and talented presented to Vice President Spiro Agnew, Commissioner of Education S.P. Marland, Jr. said that the report uncovered “major deficiencies” in the education of “one of our most neglected and potentially productive groups of students” (Marland, p. 4). The letter highlighted Chapter 8 of the report, noting immediate steps that were being taken to address the deficiencies. More than twenty years later, Richard Riley, Secretary of Education, in the foreword to the 1993 report *National Intelligence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent* noted that while some improvement had taken place in the foregoing two decades, education of the gifted remained in a state of crisis (Ross, 1993). Despite ongoing challenges in educating gifted students, Riley mentioned a number of successes in the field of gifted education, including improved curriculum and teaching strategies. The Templeton National Report on acceleration, *A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America’s Brightest Students* revisited many of the same criticisms noted in the 1971 and 1993 reports (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). In particular, this report provided compelling evidence for acceleration as a successful strategy for addressing the special curricular needs of the gifted.

Acceleration is a broad term that describes progress through a curriculum at a faster rate or younger age than is typical (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). Early college entrance is one type of acceleration described in the Templeton Report. There have been several notable attempts to institutionalize the opportunity for early college

entrance for young gifted students, including early entrance programs at the University of Washington and California State University at Los Angeles. However, despite research indicating that acceleration is the best option available to gifted students, there has not been sufficient attention given to the topic of early college entrance.

Research Question

The following question guided this investigation: What is it like to be a gifted early college entrant?

The following propositions undergirded the research question:

1. A model of giftedness as psychological difference (as opposed to a psychometric model) best describes the phenomenon of adult giftedness.
2. Radical acceleration, such as early entrance to college, is beneficial to gifted students when social-emotional needs are met.
3. Insufficient institutional attention is paid to the specialized needs of gifted early entrants.

Origin of the Problem

The problem this research addressed was the scarce information about gifted students' experience of early college entrance. A clear understanding of giftedness, particularly for adults in a college setting, is necessary to explore these experiences. Unfortunately, giftedness defies easy definition. *Conceptions of Giftedness* (Sternberg & Davidson, 2005) lists twenty-four different models for understanding or identifying giftedness. The National Association for Gifted Children references the Marland (1971), Javits (1989), Columbus Group (Morelock, 1992), the U.S. Office of Educational

Research and Improvement (Ross, 1993), Gagné (2005), and Renzulli (2005) definitions in addition to its own (May 2013) definition of giftedness. Given this plethora of definitions, how is one to understand giftedness, let alone understand how this phenomenon impacts the experience of early entrance to college?

The integration of gifted younger students into advanced educational settings would be straightforward if giftedness consisted simply of exceptional intellectual performance. However, literature on the social-emotional needs of gifted students suggests that unidimensional psychometric models do not adequately describe the affective dimensions of giftedness (Jolly & Kettler, 2008). As the fields of instruction and educational psychology have become increasingly specialized, it is important that the social-emotional underpinnings of successful interventions be elucidated, understood, and better applied to curricular design. Mönks and Katzko (2005) clarify the various definitions by juxtaposing the trait versus achievement oriented models of giftedness (Sternberg & Davidson, 2005). On the one hand, giftedness is described as an inherent trait that is rooted in psychological difference. On the other, giftedness is understood as potential that needs to be developed.

The psychological theory of *asynchronous development* relies on the work of psychologists Dabrowski, Terrassier, Binet, and Vygotsky (Morelock, 1996) and provides an explanation for why gifted persons might be a poor fit in many traditional classroom settings. According to this framework for understanding giftedness, the same student may be operating at developmentally different “ages” cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically (Morelock, 1992; Silverman, 1997, 2002).

Not all definitions of giftedness are useful for understanding the phenomenon in adults. Mönks and Heller (1994) provide insight into the differences between conceptions of giftedness. They identify the tension that occurs between cognitive and psychometric approaches to identifying gifted persons. While the two approaches are usually constructed as oppositional, Mönks and Heller see them as complementary. They argue that psychometric approach cannot provide psychological explanation for the phenomenon of giftedness but it can help identify persons whose giftedness can then be confirmed through achievement measures. The primary difference between the two approaches is that the former deals with psychological difference and the latter deals with performance. This dichotomy is especially important given that psychometric-oriented models rely heavily on early childhood identification and are often associated with talent development programs. Psychometric models focus on identifying gifted persons early and providing appropriate opportunities for the full development of potential, but they do not provide much insight for college and adult giftedness. Psychometric models of giftedness presume that a person will have fully developed their talent by the time they enter adulthood (Mönks & Heller, 1994; Silverman, 2013). In contrast, the psychological difference approach (Mönks & Heller, 1994) provides insight into late adolescence and adult giftedness by describing the experiential difference of giftedness and providing insights into the gifted person and their interactions.

Appropriate preparation for adult contributions depends on better understanding adolescent giftedness. Understanding how their development differs from that of their non-gifted classmates will better equip gifted persons in understanding and adapting to

the increased intellectual and social demands of college and the workplace. This increased self-knowledge should result in better self-regulation, attainment of goals, and a healthier self-image.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of early college entrants. The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To formulate a description of the experience of early college entrance, especially as it pertained to the uneven development described in the Columbus Group definition of giftedness (Morelock, 1992; Morelock, 1996).
2. To explore the reasons for and process of deciding to enter college early.
3. To determine if and how a participant understands how giftedness affected his or her decision for early college entrance.

This study sought to contribute to the scarce literature on adult giftedness and gifted education in a college setting, as well as to the literature on the social-emotional needs of the gifted.

Researcher's Relationship to the Problem

The author's interest in this topic was initiated when he was asked to help coordinate the visit of several Davidson Young Scholars to campus in March 2003. These Davidson Young Scholars ranged in age from 9 to 14 and had all begun taking some college course work to enrich their curriculum and satisfy the voracious appetite for learning they displayed. The occasion of their visit, a lecture by Dr. Stephen Hawking, provided an opportunity for a member of the physics faculty to give a "warm-

up” lecture on String Theory. After a rousing question and answer session following the lecture, the lecturer commented that these young students were asking questions and sharing insights on a level that was sometimes not even observed in graduate students.

During the Davidson Young Scholars’ visit, the author had the opportunity to speak with several of these students and hear their unique concerns about pursuing higher education. Among these was the frustration with limited opportunities for advanced learning outside of a college setting, but equal frustration with college systems not able or willing to accommodate students as young as they. After the Davidson Young Scholar visit, the author had the opportunity to take a position with the University Honors Program. In this position and with the particular attention to high-ability students it affords, he has had the opportunity to work with several gifted early college entrants. The researcher’s interaction with these students suggested that early entrance could be a very positive experience, especially when social-emotional factors were accommodated.

Definition of Terms

Acceleration – “Acceleration is an educational intervention based on progress through an educational program at rates faster or at ages younger than typical,” (Pressey, 1949 quoted in Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004).

Asynchrony – Uneven internal development that is marked by advanced mental complexity and emotional intensity relative to a person’s social and physical development that results in a heightened awareness of the world (Silverman, 2002).

Dyssynchrony – Lack of fit with age-appropriate developmental expectations (Silverman, 1997).

Matriculation – The status of an admitted student once enrolled in classes at the admitting college or university.

Radical Acceleration - Radical acceleration is any combination of grade-skipping or placement process that results in a student completing high school in three years or less, or enters college earlier than the traditional age of eighteen (Gross, 1994).

Thick description – The mode *par excellence* for recording observations in a naturalistic case study. At minimum, the thick description should include an explication of the focus that has occasioned the study, a thorough description of the context or setting within which the study took place and with which it is concerned, a thorough description of the interactions and processes observed in this context, a discussion of the elements that are to be studied in-depth, and discussion of “working hypotheses” that relate to understanding the focus (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability – The degree of congruence or fit between the context of a study and other contexts. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Triangulation – The use of multiple sources and multiple types of source to improve the credibility of findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness – Establishing the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of research findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This study is informed by several theoretical concepts that bear further examination: the definition of giftedness, issues in gifted identification, social-emotional needs of the gifted, asynchronous development, college transition, early college entrance, and adult giftedness. The confluence of these concepts provides a window into the experience of gifted students in a university setting.

Defining Giftedness

As noted in Chapter 1, the issue of defining giftedness is not an easy task. With the proliferation of definitions, any study engaging the topic of giftedness must clearly identify which definition(s) is (are) being used in identifying and describing the “gifted.” As someone who subscribes to the notion of giftedness as psychological difference, the researcher’s positionality differs from someone who views giftedness as performance, or a characteristic that can be measured using simply a psychometric instrument. From the researcher’s perspective, the most important definitions in the history of gifted education in the United States come from the 1971 Marland Report, the 1988 Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act (reauthorized 2002), and the 1993 report *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent*. Additionally, the 1982 Roeper definition, and the 1991 Columbus Group definition are foundational to this psychological difference approach to giftedness.

The Marland Report of 1971¹ provided the first federal definition of giftedness.

This definition remains foundational to current legislation and programming:

Gifted and talented children are those identified by professionally qualified persons who by virtue of outstanding abilities, [sic] are capable of high performance. These are children who require differentiated educational programs and/or services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society. Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination:

1. general intellectual ability
2. specific academic aptitude
3. creative or productive thinking
4. leadership ability
5. visual and performing arts
6. psychomotor ability (p. 33)

It can be assumed that utilization of these criteria for identification of the gifted and talented will encompass a minimum of 3 to 5 percent of the school population.

¹ While most sources date the Marland Report as 1972, when it was enacted, the researcher is citing the August 1971 date noted on the actual report.

Evidence of gifted and talented abilities may be determined by a multiplicity of ways. These procedures should be objective measures and professional evaluation measures which are essential components of identification. Professionally qualified persons include such individuals as teachers, administrators, school psychologists, counselors, curriculum specialists, artists, musicians, and others with special training who are also qualified to appraise pupils' special competencies. (Harrington, Harrington & Karns, 1991).

Before the Marland definition there was no federal recognition of giftedness nor funding for gifted education. The Marland definition remains foundational to current legislation and programming and is a useful milepost in describing progress in serving gifted in the United States (Harrington, Harrington & Karns, 1991).

The Javits bill, which definition provides the basis for the Texas state definition of giftedness, stressed demonstrated proficiency in one or more specific fields as well as the need for differentiated curriculum for gifted:

Gifted and talented students means children and youth who—

(1) Give evidence of high performance capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity or in specific academic fields; and

(2) Require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to develop those capabilities fully. (Javits, 1989 p. 930).

Whereas in the Marland definition, giftedness was conceived as demonstrated talent, the useful innovation in the Javits Bill was introducing a definition of giftedness as potential

that, perhaps, had not yet been realized. The Javits Bill opened the door for increased attention and funding for identifying and developing potential in gifted young students.

The genesis of the giftedness as psychological difference perspective is rooted in the work of Leta Stetter Hollingworth. However, her emphasis on the social-emotional needs of gifted persons was descriptive rather than prescriptive and her use of IQ (Stanford-Binet) as a proxy for identifying giftedness is perhaps better aligned with a psychometric approach. The first prescriptive definition of giftedness as psychological difference comes from Annemarie Roeper (1982) and hinges on the deeper and broader emotional capacity of gifted persons for richer understanding and learning. “Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” (Roeper, 1982, p. 21).

While the Marland and Javits definitions consider giftedness as potential, the 1993 definition provided in *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* updates the term “gifted.” Here, “‘gifted’ connotes a mature power rather than a developing ability, and “talent” is included and used to describe undeveloped ability. The full definition from *National Excellence* is:

Children and youth with outstanding talent [who] perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with other of their age, experience, or environment. These children and youth exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative, and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership

capacity, or excel in specific academic fields. They require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the schools.

Outstanding talents are present in children and youth from all cultural groups, across all economic strata, and in all areas of human endeavor.

(Ross, 1993, p. 3).

Little attention has been paid to this shift in terminology, but the direction is consistent with a psychometric conception of giftedness. The Marland, Javits, and *National Excellence* definitions provide useful context for the national conversation on giftedness, but in their focus on talent development and performance fail to describe how the affective dimensions of giftedness play a role in the phenomenon. As a result, these definitions contribute little to our understanding of how these social-emotional dimensions influence self-concept among the gifted or to the productivity of these persons as adults.

The Columbus Group's definition of giftedness continues the tradition of understanding of giftedness as psychological difference by tying together the work of eminent psychologists such as Dabrowski, Terrassier, Binet, and Vygotsky to describe the experience of giftedness (Morelock, 1996). The Columbus Group's definition represents a phenomenological model of understanding giftedness. This approach is more concerned with understanding the subjective experience of giftedness—what it feels like to be gifted—than with the artifacts or scores such ability produces:

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. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991 cited in Morelock 1992, p. 15)

While the Roeper and Columbus Group definitions do not contradict the Marland, Javits, and *National Excellence* definitions, they are clearly more concerned with what giftedness *is* rather than *what it looks like* in an educational setting. This distinction is central to understanding the difference between psychological difference and psychometric approaches to giftedness.

Issues in Gifted Identification

A distinction is drawn between moderately, highly, and profoundly gifted children. As most educational interventions are designed with the average student in mind, the further from average a student falls—whether above or below this average—the more likely that these interventions will be ill-suited to the needs of that student (Roedell, 1984; Silverman, 2009). In her classic treatment of the subject of highly gifted children, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942) explains her choice of 180+ IQ (Stanford-Binet) as a somewhat arbitrary point selected to ensure a cutoff point that would select out a very few highly intelligent children. “Our purpose...will be to consider investigations, made by direct methods, of the origin and development of children of a type extremely rare in occurrence, incidence being based on one variable only; i.e., intelligence measured in terms of IQ (S-B)” (Hollingworth, 1942, p. 23). Hollingworth’s (1942) intentionally

conservative approach set a cutoff of +10 standard deviation units above normal intelligence to study the “extremely rare” cases of the highly gifted (p. 24). More recent research uses a lower cutoff point for highly gifted children than did Hollingworth. Other gradations of giftedness distinguish between gifted, highly gifted (or very gifted), and profoundly gifted (or extremely gifted) (Feldman, 1979; Feldman, 1987; Kearney, 1996; McGuffog, Feiring & Lewis, 1987, Ruf, 2009). Table 1, adapted from McGuffog, Feiring and Lewis (1987), summarizes these gradations:

Table 1
Levels of Giftedness

Levels	IQ (S-B) / SD
Gifted	132-147 / $\sim 2-3\sigma$
Highly Gifted	148-163 / $\sim 3-4\sigma$
Profoundly Gifted	164+ / $4+\sigma$

In terms of normal distribution, this gradation indicates that highly and profoundly gifted children could be expected to make up about .25% or less of the general population.²

Analysis of research throughout the twentieth century shows that incidence of profoundly gifted (170+ IQ) occurs much higher than predicted among English-speaking children (Kearney, 1996), suggesting that there is cultural bias in the measure.

² Hollingworth estimated that cutoff scores of + 7-8 PE/ σ would be sufficient for identifying the most gifted of children.

In addition to not accounting for social-emotional dimensions, psychometric approaches are criticized for their focus on intelligence as a single measure of giftedness. These objections include that of perceived bias in measurement of cognitive ability. It is possible that the construct of general intelligence is shaped culturally as our measures of intelligence tests have been created by researchers who share a set of assumptions that rest on Western, post-enlightenment culture (Grantham, 2003; Daniels, 1998; Kornhaber, 1999). As such, IQ is an imperfect measure of whatever intelligence might really be. However, IQ is a useful marker of what is considered meaningful in Western, post-enlightenment culture as these cultural assumptions are shared when measuring educational performance.

Social-Emotional Needs of the Gifted

The Columbus Group phenomenological model seeks to answer the question “what is it like to be gifted?” This question has a rich precedent in the work of Leta Stetter Hollingworth, widely considered to be the mother of the gifted field. Hollingworth (1942) identified “special perplexities in the life of a gifted child” (p. 255) and “problems that arise from *the combination of immaturity and superiority*” (p. 267). Hollingworth was careful to note that these issues were internal to the gifted child and not a societal nuisance or behavioral problem.

There is a need to educate gifted persons about how their experience of the world is different than that of others. Twelve “perplexities” drawn from Hollingworth’s work highlight the need for emotional education in order to address the “combination of immaturity and superiority” often present in gifted children:

- finding enough hard and interesting work at school
- adjusting to classmates
- being able to play with other children
- not becoming hermits
- developing leadership abilities
- not becoming negativistic toward authority
- learning to "suffer fools gladly"
- avoiding the formation of habits of extreme chicanery
- conforming to rules and expectations
- understanding their origin and destiny from an early age
- dealing with the special problems of being a gifted girl. (Silverman, 1990, p. 172)

As attested to in Roeper's definition, the increased emotional intensity and sensitivity that accompany a gifted child's intellectual superiority combine in the gifted person in such a manner that the world is felt in sharp emotional relief. The ability to process, assign meaning to, and regulate one's emotional response is a function of social maturity. However, social development can lag behind emotional and intellectual development in gifted persons when their unique needs are not attended to (Betts, 1986; Silverman, 2007). Awareness of these social-emotional factors can provide gifted children with a framework through which they can better manage this social dyssynchrony. Terrassier (1979) described this social dyssynchrony as a poor fit between a gifted child and his school, friends, and family because others "misunderstand

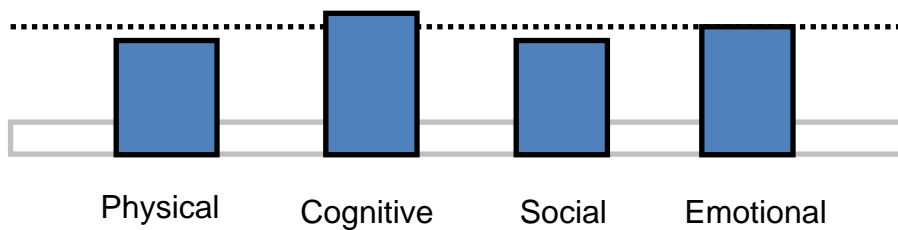
his precocity,” (p. 27). Research suggests that when appropriate social-emotional scaffolding is provided, there is no detrimental effect in accelerating gifted children (Kulik, 2004; Gross, 2004, Robinson, 2004; Subotnik, 2003).

Asynchronous Development

Stage theories of normal human development describe growth that occurs in sync across the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains. From this perspective, a normal person is the same “age” physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. While few developmental theorists strictly interpret stage theories, most agree that there are qualitative changes that correspond with age (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002). This typical development is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Normal Development. Development in the various domains happens at a similar pace such that a child is the same “age” physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally.



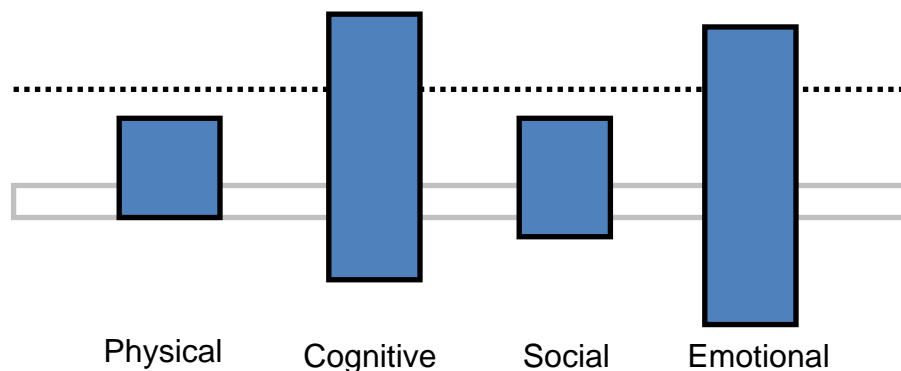
Adapted from Juntune (2003).

The Columbus Group definition, by contrast, describes the uneven development of gifted children especially in the cognitive and emotional domains (as illustrated in Figure 2.). In addition to uneven development, Silverman (1997) identifies complexity,

intensity, heightened awareness, risk of social alienation, and vulnerability as products of asynchronous development. Unlike psychometric measures of intelligence, Silverman (1997) notes that “asynchrony is not a competitive concept: more asynchrony is not better,” (p. 36). This perspective highlights the nuanced nature of the phenomenon of giftedness. Due to the de-emphasis on achievement in the construct of asynchronous development, some have suggested that the word “gifted” actually obscures the need for special support that many of these children might need (Rios, 1999; Tolan, 2012). As measured intelligence increases, asynchrony within the gifted person and dyssynchrony with the educational environment becomes more pronounced (Hollingworth, 1942; Roedell, 1984; Silverman, 2002). The further from “normal” a person’s intelligence is measured, the more likely they will need different services and educational opportunities that would not otherwise be available.

Figure 2

Asynchronous Development. Development in the various domains happens at an uneven pace, especially in the cognitive and emotional domains. The result is that a gifted child might demonstrate very different “ages” in each domain of development.



Adapted from Juntune (2003).

It is theorized that traits of intellectual and emotional overexcitability create conditions for growth that characterize giftedness. Piechowski (2013) explains “the greater responsiveness to stimuli (either from the environment or from the thoughts and memories of the child) that comes with emotional over-excitability has to be understood and accepted as coming from a deeper and more *intense processing of knowledge* and experiences” (pp. 111-112, emphasis added). Similarly, Dabrowski’s concept of “psychic overexcitabilities” describes intense stimulation in a particular area that leads to inner conflict and development:

In [Dabrowski’s] theory, inner conflict builds tension that fuels further development. Heightened sensitivity to certain kinds of stimuli (overexcitability) yields tensions that propel development. In this process the individual influences his own development. Within the gifted group individuals can be further distinguished by increasing levels of cognitive complexity and sensitivity. While development proceeds along the same lines for all, the particular characteristics of the gifted (IQ and intensity) make the gifted group qualitatively different and hence their development is different. (Coleman & Cross, 2000, p. 207).

Research on overexcitabilities in the gifted shows that cognitive complexity and emotional intensity lead to an awareness for which the child might not be ready (Silverman, 1997 p. 42). This heightened awareness is central to understanding the qualitatively different experience of giftedness. The unique way in which the gifted experience the world usually leads to dyssynchrony, or lack of fit, with curricula, processes, and systems designed for others. While asynchrony and dyssynchrony are

related concepts, asynchrony is typically used to describe an internal uneven development and dyssynchrony refers to a gifted person's lack of fit with external expectations of normality (Morelock, 1992; Silverman, 1997). External dyssynchrony influences and amplifies the internal uneven development experienced by a gifted person.

The cognitive intensity and emotional sensitivity of a gifted child creates a heightened awareness of the world (Silverman, 1994, 1997, 2002). Cognitive intensity also provides a gifted person with the drive to succeed when tackling a difficult problem. Cognitive intensity is exhibited through characteristics such as curiosity, capacity for intellectual effort, and a search for truth and understanding (Ackerman, 2009). Emotional sensitivity produces a depth and range of feeling that can be difficult to process when one has had limited life experiences. Emotional sensitivity is exhibited in “strong and complex feelings, both positive and negative;” empathy; self-evaluation; shyness; depression; strong attachments to people and places; and feelings of compassion, responsibility and concern (Ackerman, 2009, p. 90). The depth and breadth of emotional response experienced by gifted persons is possible because of their enhanced ability to understand and process information. Noting that Dabrowski's overexcitability would be more correctly called “superexcitability,” Daniels and Piechowski (2009) describe this phenomenon as “requir[ing] less stimulation to produce a response as well as a stronger and more lasting reaction to stimuli,” (pp. 8-9). “Gifted children take in information from the world around them; they react and respond more quickly and intensely than other children,” (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009, p. 4). The

implication here is that an event or stimulus that might go unnoticed to an average person might induce a very strong response from a gifted person.

Transition to College

There are several issues common to students making the transition to college. These issues include emotional, social, and academic adjustment to the college setting (Chickering, 1969). The effect that acclimation has on academic persistence and graduation comprises a relatively new field of study referred to “the first year experience” or “students in transition.” A major proposition undergirding the work in this field is that several social-emotional factors—autonomy, mastering the environment, seeking opportunity for personal growth, positive interactions with others, sense of purpose, and positive self-concept—correlate significantly with successfully negotiating the transition to college (Bowman, 2010). Intervention programs designed to address the recommendations for the first year experience have proliferated, fueled in part by the work of Howard Gardner whose Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina now hosts an annual conference on the subject. While there is no reason to believe that gifted persons necessarily have more trouble with the transition to college, the challenges of social-emotional and academic adjustment can be amplified by early college entrance (Noble & Drummond, 1992; Robinson, 2004).

Early College Entrance

In heterogeneous settings such as public schools, gifted students are often assumed to be able to fend for themselves while special services are developed to serve

below-average students (Micheletti, 2007). Underserved gifted students are likely to become bored and restless, and, if disengaged long enough, actually lose potential for achievement (Sisk, 1998; Purcell, 1993; Abbott, 1997; Henderson & Ebner, 1997). Acceleration, including interventions such as an early start to kindergarten or grade-skipping, has been shown to be beneficial to gifted students (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). Kulik's (2004) meta-analysis of 26 studies, which cover a period of over fifty years, supports that acceleration has a positive effect on academic achievement. Results of Kulik's (2004) meta-analysis showed that students who were accelerated academically were more likely to aspire to advanced degrees, participate in extra-curricular activities, and engage in critical self-evaluation. Another solution that fits the needs of some students is radical acceleration (Gross, 1994). Radical acceleration is any combination of grade-skipping or placement process that results in a student completing high school in three years or less, or entering college earlier than the traditional age of eighteen. Early entry into college is, itself, one of eighteen types of acceleration noted in the landmark study *A Nation Deceived* and might be accomplished in conjunction with other acceleration options such as an early start to kindergarten or grade-skipping (Southern & Jones, 2004). Taken together, the articles published in *A Nation Deceived* indicate that acceleration is the best intervention for gifted students (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004).

Studies show that students were satisfied with their decision to enter college early, were pleased with the camaraderie found in the early entrance cohorts, and did not feel socially maladjusted or cheated out of any adolescent experience. Currently there

are fewer than twenty early entrance programs operating in the United States (Noble et al, 2007). Rarer still are studies explicating the need for and evaluating the success of such programs. Brody, Muratori, and Stanley's essay on the history, considerations for participation, and recommendations is perhaps the most comprehensive example of the latter (2004). Olszewski-Kubilius (1998) provides detailed accounts from eleven early college entrants with different backgrounds about their experiences in programs in different states. Despite the diversity of early entrants and colleges, respondents in that study commonly described limited high school curricula, the desire for additional challenge, and a desire to find a community of peers in seeking early college opportunities (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998). In a review of literature on early college entrance, Olszewski-Kubilius (2002) indicated that there was a range of academic success for early college entrants, with some underachievement reported, but mostly for students entering college four to five years early. This study also noted that the literature on social-emotional adjustment of early college entrants was scarce. Citing results from a study of accelerated versus non-accelerated gifted students' satisfaction with their academic choices, Noble, Robinson, and Gunderson (1993) report that "adult and peer support are crucial" to gifted students' social-emotional health. Noble et al. (2007) report that, to be successful, early college entrants need rigorous academic preparation, a robust peer group, engaged faculty, and a welcoming environment. In addition to fostering intellectual growth, early entrance to college has also shown to be beneficial for positive affective development such as acceptance of individual difference, sense of belonging, academic self-concept and responsibility (Noble & Drummond, 1992; Noble et al.,

2007). A study on the experience of early college entrance on graduates from the University of Washington Early Entrance Program showed that a majority of respondents were not socially isolated in college, pursued advanced degrees, lived up to their own expectations, would consider early college as an option for their own children (Noble, et al., 2007). Women in the study reported that their gender was “a more salient factor...in conceptualizing and explaining professional achievement than it is for males,” but also experienced fewer “negative effects of their young age on their romantic possibilities,” (Noble et al., 2007, p. 163).

Adult Giftedness

The feeling of difference that accompanies giftedness does not end with formal schooling. From a psychological perspective, the asynchrony that defines giftedness persists throughout the lifespan. Lovecky (1986) describes three traits—divergency, excitability, and sensitivity—as common to gifted adults. As has been observed with Dabrowski’s overexcitabilities, these traits have the potential of producing intra- and interpersonal conflict but that this conflict may also lead to growth (Lovecky, 1986). For example, divergent thinking often produces creative results, but can also be considered an obstacle to completing group projects (Lovecky, 1986). Excitability leads to increased productivity, but also can put the gifted adult at risk for boredom as they constantly seek novelty (Lovecky, 1986). Sensitivity results in deep feelings of concern and empathy, but gifted adults may not understand others’ apparent lack of concern for their sensitive feelings (Lovecky, 1986). Fiedler (2013) has adapted Erikson’s psychosocial stages of adulthood to describe how these roles might describe the asynchrony/dyssynchrony

experienced by a gifted adult. Psychometric approaches to giftedness suggest that fully-realized giftedness in adults should be manifest as expertise, creativity, or eminence (Sternberg, 2000; Winner & Martino, 2000; Simonton, 2000). However, studies also show that persons who were identified as gifted as children continue to feel different, overwhelmed by career options, and that they have failed to live up the promise of their potential (Betts, 1986; Lovecky, 1986; Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright & Jackson, 2007; Fiedler, 2013). Similar to what has been described for gifted children in schools, gifted adults derive social-emotional support and benefit from other gifted adults and mentors (Lovecky, 1986; Kaufman, Harrel, Milam, Woolverton, & Miller, 1986; Fiedler, 2013). Together these studies suggest that the social-emotional dimensions of adult giftedness persist through adulthood.

Summary

Federal legislation mandates differentiated educational services and opportunities for students identified as gifted. Understanding giftedness as psychological difference has implications for the continuance of such differentiation for adult learners. Further insight about how these services should be structured comes from understanding the social-emotional needs of gifted persons. Early college entrance is one form of radical acceleration that holds promise for gifted adolescents at risk of stagnation in traditional classroom settings. But, as the transition to a university setting is inherently a complex process and is further complicated by the unique needs of gifted early entrants, this study proposed to understand this process directly from the perspective of gifted students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Method

The choice of research methodology and tools is not a value-neutral act. This dissertation project was informed by constructivism, a paradigm that relies on relativist ontology; interpretive epistemology; and interpretive, naturalistic methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This intersection of beliefs and perspectives provided guidance in choosing a research strategy (narrative inquiry), methods of collection and analysis (semi-structured interview and constant comparative qualitative analysis), as well as decisions about what to report and how to interpret the findings. Negotiating meaning between subjective understandings of behavior, artifacts, and language requires an approach that attends to what participants say, how the researcher interprets and encodes that information, and the perceptual lenses through which the researcher collects and reports the information (Spradley, 1980; Charmaz, 2005). While all perspectives might be equally valid, only the individuals who have had the subjective experience of early college entrance have the perspectives that can be considered “specialized” and salient to this study (Dexter, 1970). This study thus sought to report the experience of multiple early college entrants who attended a large public university.

How a student experiences early entrance to college cannot be easily quantified and is a phenomenon for which there is a growing, but still sparse, literature (Olszewski-Kubilius, 2002). Qualitative inquiry was therefore appropriate for the research question, “What is it like to be an early college entrant?” as it is oriented toward exploration and

discovery and allows for purposeful sampling of select cases that will provide rich insight to the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 1994; Patton, 2002). The study phenomenon was influenced by students' understanding of themselves as gifted persons, the reasons for their acceleration, connections with others in the college setting, their academic and social preparation for college, and the services and programs they were offered. An emergent research design was appropriate as the researcher sought to understand how these influencing factors, as well as other factors that could not be anticipated, combined to create a rich context that influenced the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2005).

The use of narrative research provides a way to tell the stories of individual experiences (Creswell, 2007). In particular, narrative analysis foregrounds the participant's perspective and provides a unique window into the lived experience of a phenomenon. The experience of early college entrance has been relatively unexplored. Though the subjective experience of early college entrance may be very different from person to person, the reasons for acceleration and the kinds of experiences and interactions an early college entrant might have may be similar. Highlighting the individual experience of early college entrants may give insight to the broader phenomenon, especially in a context that does not provide a structured experience for these students.

Creswell describes narrative analysis as a qualitative method dealing with collecting, chronologically ordering the meaning, and reporting the "lived and told" experiences of an individual or group of individuals (2007). Creswell supports

Polkinghorne's distinction between "analysis of narratives" in which themes are developed and described across multiple narratives and "narrative analysis" in which multiple narratives are distilled into a single story (2007, p. 54). This study tended toward the former, seeking to report as faithfully as possible the primary experience of each participant while also making connections across narratives to provide a broader sense of the experience (Riessman, 1993). Riessman points out that informant stories are subjective and constructed on conscious and unconscious levels (1993). The act of narrative analysis involves an expansion of that experience via the researcher's subjective construction of meaning, but is also a distillation and reduction of the informant's experience (Riessman, 1993).

In describing her use of life story research with gifted underachievers, Flint (2010) noted that "[n]arrative inquiry makes it possible for a person to tell his or her own story in the manner in which he or she wishes to tell it to a non-judgemental listener," (p. 8). This is particularly important, she says, "because sometimes people's stories are either not allowed a voice at all, or are not of their own creation, or both," (Flint, 2010, p. 8). Though not an empirical study, Olszewski-Kubilius' (1998) had early college entrants describe their experiences as part of a project designed to "help educators realize that there are children in their classrooms that need the benefit" of programs like early entrance to college (p. 227). One student noted his participation was not intended to rebut objections to early college entrance, but to "offer...a window on the experience of attending college early," (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1998, 228).

Establishing trustworthiness. The methodology for a constructivist qualitative study such as this one proceeds from a different understanding of reality (ontology) and how we come to knowledge about that reality (epistemology). Accordingly, the criteria developed to assess research conducted in a positivist paradigm—validity and reliability—are ill-suited to assess this research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Lincoln and Guba detail the techniques for establishing the naturalistic paradigm equivalents to validity and reliability as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Table 2 details how these techniques were employed in the present study.

Credibility was established in the present study through extended interviews with participants, email correspondence, triangulation between participants' experiences, member checks and peer debriefing. Transferability was established through thick description. Dependability and confirmability were established through careful cataloging of the raw interview data first in interview transcripts then as unitized ideas in virtual "cards" in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, maintaining records of data reduction and analysis products in this spreadsheet and in researcher memos, maintaining records of data reconstruction and synthesis products in researcher memos, and writing notes on the process in a reflexive journal. This reflexive journal served to help document all of these criteria.

Table 2

Techniques Employed for Establishing Trustworthiness

Criteria	Techniques
Credibility	Extended interviews; triangulation; member checks; peer debriefing; reflexive journal
Transferability	Thick description; reflexive journal
Dependability	Excel spreadsheet cataloging unitized ideas, data reduction, analysis, reconstruction, synthesis; reflexive journal; peer debriefing
Confirmability	Excel spreadsheet cataloging unitized ideas, data reduction, analysis, reconstruction, synthesis; reflexive journal; peer debriefing

Participants

The context of this study is a university in which students matriculated earlier than is traditional. Purposeful sampling provided an opportunity to select participants whose experience was pertinent to the research question (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling provides the opportunity to (1) identify participants that can serve as typical representatives of the phenomenon of study, (2) represent unique examples of phenomenon, (3) focus on cases that best represent the phenomenon of study, and (4) highlight multiple perspectives on the phenomenon of study (Maxwell, 2005).

Prospective participants were identified by having an intermediary generate a list of all students who matriculated to the university as full-time, degree-seeking students between 1963 and 2008. The intermediary reported that this process produced approximately 200 students that met these requirements. The researcher passed the list blind to the alumni association for the university which, in turn, distributed an invitation

written by the researcher to those potential participants for whom they had email addresses (see Appendix B). Of the 75 prospective participants contacted, 18 (24%) contacted the researcher. When contacted, the researcher emailed them information about the study a consent form, and a pre-screening questionnaire.

Of the 18 potential participants that responded, eight met the pre-screening requirements as they were 1) identified as gifted or had received an intervention commonly used in gifted education (e.g. grade skipping, radical acceleration); 2) university graduates; 3) aged 18 or older at the time of the study; and 4) available to meet during the study timeline. Four participants did not return contact after receiving the information packet. Three did not meet the criteria for giftedness and were disqualified by the researcher. Six responded that they were not able to meet within driving distance, but offered to complete an interview via videoconference (e.g. Skype). After scheduling three face-to-face interviews, the researcher contacted the six long-distance prospective participants. A total of eight participants, four female and four male, were ultimately recruited to the study. All were college graduates who had entered the university as full-time degree-seeking students at age 16 between 1984 and 2005. A list of these participants is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants Recruited to the Study

Pseudonym	Gender	School(s) attended, in chronological order	College Graduation Year	Age at Interview
Pete	M	public	1988	45
Oliver	M	public, parochial	1991	44
Mitchell	M	public, homeschool/private	1993	40
Derah	F	public, private/parochial	2001	31
Anne	F	public	2004	29
Orel	M	private, public	2008	25
Sallie	F	private/parochial, public	2009	23

Instruments

The instrument used for this project was the human instrument. Lincoln and Guba (1985) detail advantages as to why the human instrument is beneficial as the sole gathering instrument as follows:

1. The human instrument is able to collect responses and to respond to provide explanation.
2. The human instrument can interact and alter the situation in order to best address and guide the study dependent upon the respondent's statements.
3. The human instrument views the phenomenon in a holistic context.
4. The human instrument can build upon the base of tacit knowledge.
5. The human instrument is able to theorize about data and then test conceived theories.
6. The human instrument can provide a summary so that clarification can be gained from the respondent.

7. The human instrument can analyze the given responses to gain comprehension at a higher level.

This study sought to construct an understanding of the lived experience of early college entrance. The dynamic nature of the human instrument in a semi-structured interview provided the ability to follow up on salient experience and to connect, clarify, and expand upon an understanding of that experience.

Procedures

This study utilized an IRB-approved standardized open-ended interview (IRB Protocol # 2012-0511). A script of open-ended questions was prepared to elicit a narrative arc of participants' education, identification as gifted, understanding of giftedness, decision to enter college early, their experience of college and if and to what degree participants believed their experience of college differed from that of traditionally-aged students. This series of questions was informed by the Columbus Group phenomenological definition of giftedness and the concept of asynchronous development (Morelock, 1992; Juntune, 2003). A full list of the scripted questions for open-ended interview is reproduced in Appendix A.

Interviews ranged from one to two and a half hours in length and were conducted face-to-face so that a full range of physical responses could be observed by the researcher. Starting with an invitation to "tell me about yourself," and, "how you got here," the researcher discussed the scripted questions conversationally with the participants, checking off questions as they were answered in conversation. Those questions that were not addressed in the course of the conversation were asked

specifically before the end of the interview. This method is useful in obtaining complete data for the participant, reducing interviewer bias, and providing a tangible instrument for review (Patton, 2002). The researcher also employed informal conversational interview techniques consisting of vertical (adding layers, building on themes) and horizontal (expanding on themes) questions that provided additional data. This informally structured interview thus addressed criticisms of the traditional interview format such as its lack of flexibility and stiff delivery (Patton, 2002).

In order to fully insert himself in receiving and transmitting participant narratives, the researcher chose not to record the interviews (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Instead, he made detailed notes during the interviews using participants' own words using "jottings" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). These jottings were expanded and transformed into a transcript as soon as possible after the interview. This technique was used given the understanding that storytelling is a profoundly social and situational act (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Stake, 2005; Riessman, 1993). Knowledge of what was reported was created between the participants' telling and the researcher's understanding and re-telling (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) of these narratives.

Transcripts were initially sent to participants for review, correction, and supplementation as soon as complete. In this manner, a narrative was constructed that emphasized both the participants' experience in telling the story and the subjective role of the researcher in hearing and encoding the story. Results of analysis were sent to participants for a final member check.

As the open-ended interview format allowed participants to address questions in a different order than how they appeared on the script, the narrative flow for each participant was slightly different. When recounting their stories, participants tended to remember things out of order or answer different questions than were asked. In the process of member-checking, some participants were concerned with this seeming lack of order. While the interview transcripts were not verbatim and did not represent normal features of spoken conversation such as pauses or vocalized filler (e.g. “um”), care was taken to use participants’ own language in constructing the transcripts. Participants were encouraged to take ownership over these transcripts and had free reign in making additions, changes, and deletions to the transcripts.

Analysis of data. The data obtained through interviews was analyzed using the constant comparative qualitative method as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Analysis began in the process of reading interview transcripts and expanding observation notes and was developed in a reflexive journal (Spradley, 1979, 1980). Analytic strategies included the use of a reflexive journal, research memos, thematic coding, and narrative analysis (Maxwell, 2005).

Beginning with reading interview transcripts, the researcher identified discrete ideas and unitized these using emic descriptors drawn from the participants’ responses. As the researcher began to build categories a tentative definition of each category was established in a reflexive journal. After categorizing the data, categories were reviewed for consistency, overlap with other categories, and the relationships between and among the data was determined. Categories were collapsed or exploded as needed to adequately

include codes that emerged from the data. This was an iterative process that extended into the writing process and required several revisions to construct categories and subcategories that best fit the data. The researcher sought insight from peers by sharing developing categories and themes and seeking feedback from his committee chair on the coherence between the interview transcripts and analysis.

Unitized ideas from interview transcripts were coded to identify 1687 initial “open codes.” These codes were iteratively refined with care to retain emic language. Refined codes were collapsed into 40 subcategories and these subcategories were then sorted into seven overarching categories to help elucidate the experience of early college entrance. The process was documented through reflexive journaling and researcher memos. This analysis continued through the process of writing up the results of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter the results of this study are organized by the overarching categories and subcategories that emerged from the analysis and include quotes from the participant interview transcripts.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to seek to understand the lived experience of early college entrants. Through the use of a standardized open-ended interview, the researcher asked participants to provide detailed information about their education before and after being identified as gifted, how they understood themselves as gifted persons, their experience of college, and differences in their experiences. Specific objectives of the study were to describe the college entrance experience based on the asynchronous development theory described in the Columbus Group definition of giftedness (Morelock, 1992), to explore the reasons for and process of deciding to enter college early, and to understand how participants' understanding of giftedness affected their decision for early college entrance.

Results

This study presents the experience of eight gifted early college entrants whose decision to enter college early was influenced by their own and family expectations for achievement, accelerated and enriched academic preparation, and social-emotional awareness. The combination of these contexts created a sense of agency and feeling of self-efficacy, which informed participants' decisions to enter college early. These

contexts and their interaction were distilled from participant responses in seven overarching categories: life story, being exceptional, understanding exceptionality through others' experience, transition to college, academic preparation, getting involved, and social-emotional experience. While participants downplayed any difference in their experience of college, they did note that their younger age resulted in differential access to opportunities outside of the classroom. The corresponding social-emotional impact resulted in a different experience of college for these early entrants.

The overarching categories described in Table 4 will be used to organize the results section. In the discussion of overarching categories and subcategories that follows, the overarching categories are used as an organizing structure for the narrative.

Table 4

Overarching Categories

	Overarching Category
1.	Life story
2.	Being exceptional
3.	Understanding exceptionality through others' experience
4.	Transition to college
5.	Academic preparation, performance and experience
6.	Getting involved and pursuing interests
7.	Social-emotional awareness and agency

Life Story

The aim of this study was to understand, as fully as possible, these participants' experiences of early college entrance. Five out of eight participants responded to the

open-ended question “tell me about yourself/how did you get here?” with an extensive life narrative that began with their early childhood or even birth. The implication of these broader narratives was that participants felt their *life story* and formative experiences were integral to explaining the experience of early college entrance. Examples of this framing are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Life Story

Life story
1. Life story
2. Family history
3. Fathers’ careers and education
4. Mothers’ careers and education
5. Parental decisions
6. Move
7. Mentor
8. Goals
9. Work experience
10. Emotional health

Participants shared a range of *family history* and background including parents’ and grandparents’ education and career decisions. Every participant described a parent or grandparent whose education or career accomplishments provided them with an example of success. Mitchell (note: pseudonyms are used throughout this report) described the importance of education in his family and related a story about his grandfather as an example of taking risks to increase educational opportunity:

When my grandfather was a kid, he only wanted to work on the ranch [settled by Mitchell's great-grandfather in 1852] but his mother, my great-grandmother, insisted that her boy would go to college. She said that if he wanted to run the ranch, he wouldn't have a job until he had a degree. She took him to [the college] and told him not to come home until he was done. That was a pretty amazing thing for a ranch family in 1936 when college wasn't expected unless you were going to be a doctor or lawyer. My grandfather said the degree changed him for the better. He hated it while he was there, but it exposed him to things he would never have known otherwise.

Mitchell, Pete, Oliver and Anne all gave some detail about their *fathers' careers and education*. Three of the four men held some position of authority including as a Baptist pastor (Mitchell's father), head of a community college and later as an Adjutant General (Oliver's father), or vice-president of a telecommunications firm (Anne's father). Pete did not give details about his father's career other than to say that he was an engineer who had double-majored in math and physics. Oliver's father received a Ph.D. in education and Orel's father received a Ph.D. in chemistry. Sallie, Pete, Oliver, and Orel described their *mothers' careers and education*. Alice's mother started a bookkeeping service without any specialized training but attracted a sizeable clientele. Pete's mother worked in defense contract administration, Oliver's mother was a high school math teacher, and Anne's mother was a nurse involved in hospital medical records administration. Orel's mother received a master's degree in accounting and Alice's mother received a nursing degree. Participants seemed generally proud of their

parents' accomplishments and their inclusion in these life stories suggests that their parents' experiences were a positive influence on these participants' own academic successes. This admiration was not uncritical, however. Mitchell described his father as "off-the-charts brilliant" but also related how his father's abusive childhood evolved into a combative personality and control issues that subsequently damaged their family. Sallie, Mitchell and Pete all described family tension that became a motivating factor for them to graduate early and leave home.

Participants noted the influence of *parental decisions* throughout their narratives. Citing dissatisfaction with available educational options, Mitchell and Derah's parents started their own private schools. Alice, Pete, Orel, and Oliver's parents made decisions to enroll their children in school early. While none of the participants seemed to have direct knowledge of their parents' reasons for their early start, Orel ventured that the decision might have been to provide him with a competitive edge and benefitted his parents by reducing the amount of time they had to financially support him. Oliver and Orel both said that their parents believed they "were ready" for schooling at an early age.

There were similarities in the narratives. Six of the eight participants described a family *move* while growing up; four of these were interstate moves. In their narratives, Pete, Orel, Anne and Alice attribute their early college entrance to the different ways in which their acceleration was handled state-to-state. Participants described a choice that their parents made to accelerate them. In several of these cases, parents had to advocate for them not to be held back a grade after a move to another state.

Half of the participants described an authority figure that served as a type of *mentor*. Anne said that she “sees [her] father as successful” and related a lesson he taught her was that “every hand you shake will help you in some way.” Mitchell admired his grandfather, looked up to the man he worked for at the saddle warehouse, as well as to a retired band director in whose swing band he played. Derah described connecting with a few professors, one of which she worked for as a grader throughout her time in college. Sallie identified a mentor who led a mental health support group she joined after college, but who died within a year of their meeting. However, none of the participants seemed to have established a formal mentorship with these authority figures; these mentorship relationships were informal.

All but one participant expressed being goal-oriented. *Goals* included pursuing advanced degrees, owning a business, buying a house, and moving up a career ladder. Participants described being successful and exceeding their intended goals. Derah, relating how she became the youngest person to hold an executive rank at her company, said “I haven’t had any grand career aspirations, haven’t plotted it out. I’ve had some pretty great opportunities present themselves and said, ‘that looks like fun!’” Alice made a similar point when she described getting her dream job ten years ahead of her scheduled goal date.

Participants’ *work experience* during and after graduating from college gave additional dimension to their experience as early entrants. Every participant described their current work as either intrinsically fulfilling or providing useful support for their lifestyle. Sallie’s first job out of school was working for a psychologist in Houston. She

said the job was terrible and she was convinced that fraud was occurring, but found a silver lining in that she was able to connect to a mental health support group. Mitchell described his job in logistics as satisfying his need to organize. During a period of time when he was doing different work, he said that he missed the experience of having his “hair on fire; it’s like a big puzzle where you have to fit all the pieces together.” Derah’s work gave her the opportunity to work with industry leaders and influence national policy.

Participants’ work experience also presented challenges. Derah relates that it was “difficult to become the boss of a thirty-year veteran and have them recognize what qualifies you.” Alice described being turned down for jobs in college because she was overeducated. She said that her “biggest challenge has been gender. Working in a male-dominated field, it hasn’t mattered how smart I am.”

The issue of emotional health emerged for both Sallie and Mitchell. Sallie described mental health as “a huge issue that compounded everything.” Sallie’s struggle with medication affected her relationship with family prior to entering college, her experience of college, and her experience of life after college. Sallie explained that her *emotional health* struggle both complicated and helped her work experience. Through her first job out of college, Sallie found a support group to which she became attached and worked for as an advocate. Her current job, working for her mother, allowed her to take time off when she was overwhelmed and could not work. Mitchell said, “I was a mess emotionally and still am in some ways.” An expected job offer fell through and a

hurried job search before graduation placed Mitchell into a job that allowed him to figure out “what [he] was born to do.”

Being Exceptional

The experience of being exceptional was both a product of and cause for higher expectations, accelerated and enriched educational opportunities, and different social-emotional experiences. Examples of this framing are presented in Table 6.

Being aware of being gifted can create an ‘aha’ experience, something that leads to deeper understanding of oneself, a deeper experience of the world, or to seeing the world differently. *Epiphanies* such as Mitchell’s, which he described as “like a light bulb [going] off...I started seeing the entire world as a supply chain,” have helped participants develop a deep sense of integrity between their values, abilities, and interests. An undisclosed personal event during Orel’s junior year of college made him “question why things are presented the way they are” and left him “awakened and aware of what [he] wanted to do.” Derah’s epiphany followed a romantic encounter at the beginning of college that precipitated an angry response when she disclosed her age. She said:

That flipped a switch for me. People had asked if I was going to tell people my age. Before, I wasn’t going to, but I didn’t want anything like that to happen again. From day one, I didn’t know anyone, but I said, “Hi, I’m Derah! I’m sixteen!” I became known as the sixteen-year-old and embraced it.

Table 6

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Being Exceptional

Being exceptional
1. Epiphanies
2. Age difference
3. Personal characteristics
4. Figure it out
5. Opportunity
6. Not identified as gifted
7. Gifted identification
8. No different experience
9. Giftedness is
10. Normalize giftedness
11. Like-minded people
12. Adult exceptionality

Participants' difference in age from peers was variously described as "not inconsequential," "arbitrary," "a novelty," and "not an issue." Clearly there was a range of experience that was meaningful in different ways to participants. *Age difference* seemed to have been context-dependent as described above in Derah's story. Orel noted "my age was not an issue with my friends at first, but once they turned twenty-one and started wanting to go out that was difficult." However, differential access to social opportunities was the only difference Orel noted as "any other difference based on age was established before [he] came to college." While some participants were more self-conscious of their younger age and only disclosed their age if asked, Derah embraced her age as something that made her stand out and for which she got "special social exceptions."

Entering college two years younger than is typical meant that most of the participants also entered the workforce two years younger than was typical. For Orel, this age difference was a positive outcome that gave him “two extra years” of the “best time of [his] life.” Alice’s degree program lost accreditation when she was a semester away from finishing her degree. The resulting change of major caused her to lose 55 credit hours and tacked on an extra two years of college. Alice however found this to be a positive outcome as she would not have been able to get her professional license at age twenty if she had graduated at the expected time.

Keeping a positive attitude, defying expectations, and an entrepreneurial spirit all emerged as *personal characteristics* through which participants’ exceptionality was exhibited. Even when participants did not express having a clear sense of direction in college, an incredible self-awareness, competitive nature, focus, and ability to “figure it out” helped these early entrants overcome what might seem to be insurmountable obstacles for others.

The personal characteristic of “figuring it out” also manifested itself creatively through entrepreneurial activity in these participants’ stories. Mitchell said, “when your family doesn’t have money, you learn that if you want things you have to make money somehow.” Mitchell fought his grandfather’s impression that he was like the son-in-law he disapproved of by selling greeting cards door-to-door and working at a saddle warehouse. Later, Mitchell got his grandfather’s permission to use ranch equipment and sold firewood cut on the family’s land. Mitchell said that he and his brother made thousands of dollars selling firewood:

When it was time to go back to school, I realized that our source of income was about to dry up, so we hired a local guy who was down on his luck to do the work and paid him \$60/cord and still made \$40/cord by continuing to sell them at \$100/cord. That was the first time I didn't feel poor.

Alice exhibited an entrepreneurial spirit in the way that she pursued employment in college. She gave a litany of jobs she worked including data entry, house-sitting, babysitting, carriage driver, bus tour guide, and guiding and fueling planes at the airport.

Anne said, "I made the same mistakes about being on my own and going to class. I figured it out and got serious at sixteen; some eighteen-year-olds don't *figure it out*." Exceptionality was also evident in the way that participants could tap into intuitive knowledge. Derah said, "I could just take a look at a problem and know the answer without knowing how I got it. For me it just made sense. I would read something and say, 'Oh! That's the name for that!'"

Mitchell loved music and described picking up piano at age four, guitar at age six, and organ at age nine despite being unable to read music. "Music is math," he said. "I can't read music but I can hear intervals." When a retired band director took interest in Mitchell's ability and began teaching him to read music, Mitchell became frustrated with the pace of instruction:

During one lesson, I was so frustrated that I had to play something and get it out of my system, so I banged out a Ray Charles song. [The instructor] slammed the keyboard shut and said, 'this is a waste of time for both of us.' I think it was hard for him to say so, but he conceded that I didn't need to learn to read music.

The instructor asked Mitchell to sit in on his swing band and Mitchell listened for a few bars, then played a solo because he had picked up the structure of the song.

Participants noted again and again that they were provided an immense amount of *opportunity* which one participant characterized as “lucky breaks,” but did not seem to realize that their intelligence, personalities, and preparation often positioned them to take advantage of these opportunities. Participants who reported academic struggles in college did so against a backdrop of expectation for high achievement. Academic struggle is common for many college students, even those who are not concurrently dealing with the social implications of being younger. Participants did not seem to realize that performing at an average level among students two years their senior was, in itself, a noteworthy accomplishment. When accelerated students achieved at a higher level than classmates, their performance simply fit with their internal standard for achievement. For example, Sallie noted that she “didn’t put much effort in at all” but said she “graduated with a B average.” Five of eight participants also began or completed an advanced degree. Derah ascribed her success, at least in part, to luck, but also noted that following the interview for her first job she was “the only one that sent thank you cards” out of close to 100 interviewees.

Despite responding affirmatively in the study pre-screening questionnaire that they were identified as gifted, there was a marked ambivalence toward this label amongst the participants. Five participants indicated in their interviews that they were *not identified as gifted*. Orel was the most vocally opposed participant to his gifted label, noting that he felt like he “didn’t earn it.”

Participants cited standardized testing most often when asked about *gifted identification*. Sallie mentioned having a high IQ though she does not have the records. Mitchell said he consistently scored several years ahead on the California Achievement Test his parents used at their school. Oliver notes that he tested above his peers in math and language, but did not know how he was formally identified. Orel said that the gifted label was assigned to him because of his age, not because of merit. Anne said she did not apply to the gifted program available in her school district because her teacher did not explain what it was. None of the participants explicitly pointed to their ability to enter college early and their subsequent success in graduating from college or completing an advanced degree as evidence of giftedness.

Half of the participants indicated that they had *no different experience* in college than did their peers. Those that did acknowledge a difference assigned it to a cause other than that of age or ability. This tendency to normalize giftedness stood at odds with the way in which participants themselves defined giftedness. In the words of participants, giftedness was “picking things up faster,” “exceptionalism,” “quicker processing,” “a spectrum of talent,” “higher than average grades,” “I don’t do things the normal way” and “elaborate vocabulary and good imaginary life.” However, the general high achievement among participants, their ability to pull themselves out of academic trouble, and thoughtful self-awareness suggests that they fit their own definitions of giftedness.

Perhaps part of their inclination to *normalize giftedness* is that these participants did not report finding a critical mass of *like-minded people*. Both Oliver and Orel mentioned a desire to find such a group. Orel said that he found peers in graduate school

in Chicago and in his work in Washington, D.C. and did not want to move close to family as he felt it would be difficult to find people interested in the same social issues as he was. Six of eight participants felt like their exceptionalism persisted into adulthood. Pete explained *adult exceptionalism*:

I think that giftedness is a natural ability to process information. It is at one end of the bell curve. The processing is quicker, faster. I think that the ability has persisted into adulthood for me. I'm not used to talking about myself. The company that I work for sells a wide array of IT equipment and sales are subdivided by market. People can't be good at everything. But I keep hearing people say, "Pete can sell everything in the catalog."

Unlike other participants, Alice complicated the idea of adult exceptionalism and made it subjective. She said, "I don't take time to think about my gifts. I see gifts in others and want to do what they do." She described recent interactions with an orthopedic surgeon and a rescue pilot that both expressed that they wished they could be an engineer as she was. Her response was "it seems strange to me that what I view as a challenge...seems easy to them. I guess it's just personal perspective." Alice was more generous in her evaluation of ability in others than she was in evaluating herself. Fiedler (2013) acknowledges denial of giftedness as a common theme among gifted adults. She suggests recognizing giftedness in others but not in oneself could be related to feeling overwhelmed at the implications of not living up to expectations (Fiedler, 2013).

Understanding Exceptionality through Others' Experience

When asked to define giftedness, participant responses included information about gifted education from their experiences with their children and family members. After this theme emerged in interviews two and three, the researcher asked participants how they would respond if their child became interested in entering college early. Abstracting the issue seemed to provide a way for participants to critically reflect on their own experience. Examples of this framing are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Understanding Exceptionality through Others' Experience

Understanding exceptionality through others' experience
1. Childrens' experience
2. Gifted family members

Participants provided details about the identification and education of their children and other *gifted family members*. Pete said his kids are “smart, not gifted” and laments that “there is not a program now for kids that are just smart until high school.” He said that “in the vernacular...gifted means thinks like Asperger's, savant or that the kids don't have the social skills.” Oliver described a nephew that used to be able to add large numbers in his head. He said that once the nephew started school and was taught how to add and carry numbers he could not do the mental arithmetic anymore. Oliver

said, “I know we train lots of good stuff in, but I wonder what we’re training out.” Orel described his sister’s struggle for an appropriate educational setting:

[W]e were trying to enroll my sister early in [a new state] but they wouldn’t allow it. So we put her in a Montessori school. She got her chance to jump ahead by entering [an early college program]; she entered this program one year earlier than most students do.

While Orel was uncomfortable with being assigned a gifted label, his sister’s achievements fit the definition he offered for giftedness. Anne said that her sister’s children have been identified for gifted programming and the identification process reminds her of her own ability as a child. Alice noted that her sister has one child that is gifted and one child is gifted and talented, which required that the child also exhibit a talent such as playing an instrument.

Alice described her *childrens’ experience* in great detail, providing information about the identification testing and curricular interventions they have experienced. She said, “you get pulled out of regular classes for one day a week to do special activities. Then you have to make up the work. It’s not very motivating. I don’t like the way it’s set up.” Her son was offered the opportunity to skip a grade but declined the offer because it would have meant giving up a student council representative role for his current grade. Alice explained that she was apprehensive about the move because, while his classmates are nice where they were living, they might not be as nice somewhere in a new location. Instead, “they let him go for one period for reading and that helps him maintain that feeling of being special...that motivation.”

Alice's other child provides a different view into giftedness. She explained that her daughter came home with a 69 on an aptitude test that required a score of 107 to be placed in the gifted program. Alice said her daughter "didn't know the test meant anything so she didn't pay attention." She was able to re-test and entered the program. These experiences highlighted the importance of motivation in translating gifted potential to recognized achievement.

Pete explained that his 12-year-old recently announced that she was bored with school and wanted to graduate early. Pete said that the ability to be successful as an early college entrant depends on the child and their maturity, but felt his daughter could handle early college entrance. Several participants noted that they would consider the option of early college entrance for their children if they felt the children were socially and intellectually mature enough. Participants tacitly endorsed their experience of early college entrance by considering early college entrance as an option for someone they might advise, such as their children or a younger family member.

Transition to College

The transition to college included finishing high school, applying to and completing the steps necessary to enroll in college, considering the benefits of attending college, as well as reasons for choosing a particular college. Examples of this framing are presented in table 8.

The decision to enter college early is often a cumulative effect of decisions made along the course of a student's educational experience. As Oliver pointed out in his interview, "you aren't [deciding to accelerate] when they want to go to college but

before they [even] start school.” The process of applying to and selecting a college may not be significantly different for an early college entrant than for a traditionally-aged student, but there are additional implications for these of younger age. For example, the social support networks in place in college might not serve a younger student well. Proximity to family or some other support network can be an important factor. The parents of early college entrants must cope with the emotional and financial implications of children leaving home earlier than expected and they may pay less attention to the extraordinary social-emotional implications of their choice.

Table 8

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Transition to College

Transition to college
1. Early graduation strategy
2. Applying to college
3. Decision to go to college

Some of the participants had guidance and mentoring that assisted with the transition. Sallie described a good relationship with her high school counselor who helped her work out an *early graduation strategy*. Sallie said that “she was involved every step of the way,” including setting up college correspondence courses and summer classes. Anne said she wanted to finish high school early so she accomplished that in three years by taking summer classes. Mitchell said that he “pushed himself to graduate early,” noting that the self-paced curriculum offered in his parents’ school gave him the

opportunity to do additional homework every night. As he had no formal counselor, Mitchell relied on his brother's access to information from a local community college for help. Sallie and Mitchell's experiences were roughly 20 years apart. This difference could have been due to improved counseling support over the past 20 years or a difference in resources between private versus public schools.

Mitchell found that his parents' lack of knowledge about or attention to the college admissions process almost had negative consequences. When he inquired about the deadline to register for freshman classes, his mother remembered receiving a letter and when she found it realized that the deadline was that same day. Mitchell said, "I would've been so angry if I had done all that work only to have it negated by my parents' misplacing a letter. My parents were 'fly by the seat of their pants' and still are. It drives a logistics guy crazy. You know, sometimes we do things as a reaction to the way things were for us."

Participants gave themselves very narrow options by *applying to college* only in their home states. Mitchell, Orel and Alice indicated that they did not consider any other college options. Orel said that he did not think about taking a year off after high school; none of the other participants except Derah noted that this might have been an option. Derah indicated that she could have graduated at fourteen, but decided to "slow down, take it easy and enjoy [her] friends."

Anne applied to several schools but cited the selectivity and academic reputation of her college as factors in her decision to attend. She said that there was "no option about whether or not to go to college," for her. She said that "everyone thought I was

crazy to make such a big decision at sixteen,” but she had determination and focus to pursue a career in business. Anne said that her college “was a hard school to get into but I got in and got the major I wanted.” She spoke a little regretfully about how narrowly she considered her options:

It was because I was sixteen...I didn't think about applying for scholarships, looking out of state, looking at Ivy League schools. I just looked at [in-state] schools. My siblings all went to local schools. They weren't gifted...they weren't as successful as I was. My parents didn't have the perspective to push me to do those things. I chose [this college] because it has such a great track record, especially in engineering and business.

Anne was incredulous about the way she made this decision. She noted, “I look back at it now and can't believe that I just went away, not to junior college, but to a big school. I had just started driving; I turned sixteen and I was driving away.”

Sallie, Oliver, Orel, Anne and Derah cited affective reasons for choosing their college, including the friendly atmosphere, alumni network, and values espoused by the school. Oliver said that there was a “comfort factor” with the college he chose. The *decision to go to college* was also influenced by family history with the college or higher education in general, scholarship opportunities and the cost of different college options. Oliver noted that waiting to go to college might not have been an attractive option. “[W]hat happens when you get to that decision and you decide against early college? If not that, what? You could quickly go from feeling ahead to feeling behind.”

Alice said “I always knew I was going to college” though she did not feel her parents influenced her decision. “It was mostly just that everyone else in high school was going.” Alice was in the top 10% of her high school class and had a high enough SAT score from taking the test in seventh grade as part of the Duke Talent Identification Program that she did not have to take the test again. She said that she liked that option since it “takes the pressure off.” While it was not required, she then took the ACT her senior year “for fun.”

Academic Performance, Preparation and Experience

An early start in college was due to *acceleration*, including some combination of starting kindergarten early, skipping a grade, and graduating early from high school.

Table 9 describes these combinations.

Participants started school early, skipped grades and graduated from high school early to get to college at age 16. An interesting observation that emerged from the analysis of Table 10 is that women in the study more often used accelerated high school graduation as a strategy to enter college early, whereas men in the study more often were started in school a year early. Participants typically led the decision to graduate early from high school, whereas parents led the decision to start participants in school early. The difference in the strategy for acceleration might signal a difference in the feeling of agency, or ability to determine one’s on path, felt by the participant. Examples of this framing are presented in Table 10.

Table 9

Participants' Acceleration Strategies

Pseudonym	Gender	Accelerated Start	Skipped Grade?	Accelerated High School Graduation	Years to graduate from college	Years of schooling before college
Alice	F	Y		Y	6	10
Anne	F	N	Y	Y	4	10
Derah	F	N	Y	N	6	10
Mitchell	M	N		Y	4	10
Oliver	M	Y		N	4	10
Orel	M	Y		N	4	10
Pete	M	Y	Y	N	4	10
Sallie	F	N		Y	4	10

Table 10

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Academic Preparation, Performance, and Experience

Academic preparation, performance and experience
1. Acceleration
2. Before starting school
3. Enrichment
4. Ability
5. Classroom experience
6. Academic preparation
7. Academic struggle
8. Change of major
9. College academics
10. Support in college
11. College faculty
12. Motivation and effort
13. Graduate school experience

Not all participants had memories of their early years *before starting school*, but those who did related *enrichment* activities. Pete said that his experience before school was “Big Bird;” Orel echoed this by saying he watched “educational shows like Sesame Street.” Orel pointed to a multi-cultural learning experience with Sesame Street noting that he “learned to count to ten in Spanish.” He described this experience as “nothing out of the ordinary” and that he had “toys like other kids.” Derah said she got math workbooks at the teacher supply store and completed them for fun. Participants who started kindergarten early did not seem to have a complete understanding of their parents’ decision to enroll them at a young age, but trusted that their parents knew that they were ready for acceleration. Oliver explained, “I was ready, I talked early. I was speaking in complete sentences by age two.”

Participants were generally positive about their intellectual *ability*. Five of the eight mention their high school class rank as being in the top 5-10%. Anne and Derah both noted that school was very easy. Alice said that she made straight A’s without studying. Oliver noted a similar experience saying that he “did well in school without trying hard, even in the gifted program.” Pete described himself as a bright kid with good grades. Sallie said she “outperformed other students” and had an “above average IQ.”

The participants who attended public schools throughout elementary and middle school seemed to benefit from the way that different states handled early entrance and from parents who advocated for them. Pete began kindergarten a year early in a suburb of Detroit, and then was part of a program that placed a group of first grade students in a

second grade classroom. Pete said, “I don’t know if the teachers were giving us special attention or easier work, but by mid-year there was no distinction and we were just in with the rest of the class.” Pete was promoted to third grade at the end of the year. When his family moved to a different state following year he said, “there was a question about whether or not I would be let into the fourth grade because of my young age. Whatever my parents said must have worked because they let me go on.” Anne was supposed to start in kindergarten when her family moved [out of state], but she was placed in first grade instead. Anne said “it was no big issue. I was able to read and did OK.” When her family subsequently moved to another state and then back to her home state, Anne remained a year ahead of her classmates.

The *classroom experience* before college varied for participants. Sallie said that there was no special treatment at the private school she attended; the students were “all smart.” In contrast, Orel said he “definitely got special treatment.” The pull-out gifted program in which he participated at his public elementary school consisted of “all smart astronaut kids” and featured classes like “Space Science,” “LEGO logo,” and “Architecture Illustrated.” In later grades, Orel remembered that there was an expectation that gifted students would take advanced courses and that gifted students would be placed in regular courses if they were not making good grades. Mitchell described the weakness of the self-paced curriculum at his parents’ school, noting that subjects such as math and science require an instructor with some expertise. Derah said that her high school environment was “lax” because she was a good student. Alice remembered enjoying the feeling of being “smartest in the class.” When she and her twin

sister saw other students being pulled from class for “special education,” they asked to be tested so they could go, too. Alice said, “we did our best on the test so, of course, we did very well. They didn’t put us in ‘special education.’” She and her sister realized their goal for feeling “special” only after moving to another state and being placed in a gifted program.

Participants described a range of *academic preparation* including public, private, parochial and home school environments as well as various enrichment, self-study options, and taking classes for college credit while simultaneously enrolled in high school. Half of the students attended public schools and their descriptions of early gifted educational experiences showed a similar reliance on enrichment activities. In high school, participants in public schools had the opportunity to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Participants in private, parochial, and home school environments reported self-paced study and uneven curricula. Mitchell, who attended the private school his parents started from grade two on, described college as his “first formal education.” Mitchell was especially critical of the math and science preparation he received in high school.

Orel, who in adulthood works in program evaluation, had the most incisive insight as to why students might be underprepared:

I’ve wondered if the program was biased because those in the program didn’t have any performance criteria. In middle school and high school, if you weren’t making good grades, they’d put you in regular classes, but those in the [elementary school] program didn’t have any performance criteria. Student

evaluations from these classes rated our participation, leadership, and grasp of concepts. No tests were administered...in the program that I can recall. It was just sort of an enriching, almost extra-curricular experience.

Participants experienced *academic struggle* at different points. Orel was not able to keep up in AP Calculus and struggled in English, reading and history in middle school. Alice decided, as AP credit would not count for the degree program she wanted to pursue, she would simply go to college early. Whereas several participants reported that high school came easy, college was a different experience for them. Derah described lying to her parents and saying that her classes were really difficult, but the reality that she hid was that she was spending too much time drinking and socializing. She said it was “hard to fit in a lot of school because of my social life.”

Pete said that the biggest struggle coming to college was “a lack of preparation on the front end.” He did not realize that he had to take a math placement exam before registering for classes and was angry when he had to re-take calculus. Derah also reported struggling in math. As noted above, Orel struggled with English, reading and history in middle school, so in high school he focused on taking advanced math and science courses. Orel continued to struggle with his academic preparation into college. He said, “I was going through the motions. I was studying but it wasn’t clicking and I wasn’t making the grades I wanted,” before changing majors in college.

Five of eight participants describe a *change of major*. Mitchell, Pete, Derah made changes due to their academic struggles and said that the better fit with a new major resulted in better grades. Alice’s change of major was involuntary due to her degree

program losing accreditation. Orel changed majors to focus on subject matter that he found interesting.

All participants described an adjustment to *college academics*. Oliver described a jump in the level of rigor. Derah said that college was “harder than I thought it would be.” Pete was on scholastic probation through the first two years of college. His grades picked up after he switched majors. Anne wondered if college would not have seemed so hard if she had gone to class. Sallie and Oliver wished that they had branched out. Orel shifted his way of thinking about education during college. He noted that he had previously thought that school was just an obligation, but then he came to see it as preparation for life. He said, “It may very well be that the people I encountered at [College X] were not stimulated by the curriculum,” but he got the impression that they were not there for an education but “incubating for a job.”

Participants sought *support in college* from various sources. Sallie found that the mother of a high school friend was someone she could talk to when necessary. This friend’s mother also took Sallie in when she had to take a semester off from school. More commonly, participants noted not having adequate advising support. Derah said that she persisted in her engineering major despite being told by an advisor that she should consider a different major after struggling to pass Calculus. Sallie also mentioned getting uneven advising support and deciding not to complete her minor because she “didn’t think [that she] would be able to get it done without going through several people.”

Both Mitchell and Derah described positive interactions with *college faculty*. Mitchell said that one faculty member was the first person to take a real interest in his education and had a significant impact on his education. Mitchell described an assignment given early in this professor's class that required students to take a stance on abortion. Mitchell said that only two people in the class received grades of A; everyone else—including Mitchell—failed the assignment for giving “milquetoast answers.” Mitchell said that this professor taught him how to know what he believed and what it meant to have integrity. Mitchell said, “he pulled the veil back.” Derah described an arrangement with a professor who was teaching from a draft textbook he was writing. As she had previously taken a course with the professor and proved that she could master the material, the professor allowed Derah to simply show up for tests and in exchange for editing his textbook.

Participants highlighted the role that *motivation and effort* played in their college studies. Sallie's disappointment at not being admitted by her top choice school cast a shadow on her effort, “I didn't put much effort in at all. I took just the classes I needed to graduate and didn't branch out.” Mitchell detailed what motivated him:

I could've studied or shined my shoes and not get yelled at so I blew off the scholastic stuff. I think that I was intellectually burned out. I had crammed in so much to get there that I took a mental break. I figured I could not go to class and get a C. I told my friends that my goal was not to fail out, so anything above a 2.0 was wasted effort.

Derah's account illustrated her motivation and effort in pulling herself out of an academic hole:

I did just enough to get by. I was there six years and spread it out. I also got minors in math and physics. I slept through a lot of classes. I was that girl would come in, put my head down and sleep until it was time to leave for the classes that took attendance. If they didn't take attendance I just skipped. My parents got upset and had me come home until I could pull up my grades. It was really difficult, but I looked it and thought, "I can really do this if I focus."

Six of eight participants also pursued a *graduate school experience*: Sallie, Mitchell, Oliver, Orel, Derah, Alice all began or have completed master's degrees.

Getting Involved and Pursuing Interests

Despite pervasive stereotypes of gifted students as socially maladjusted, empirical research suggests that most gifted students are actually well-adjusted, athletic and popular (O'Connor, 2005). Participant responses in this category describe their involvement in various extracurricular interests. Examples of this framing are presented in Table 11.

Almost all participants described being *engaged in high school*: Sallie was in honor society and choir. Mitchell worked, was in Demolay (a junior Freemason organization), and played in a band. Pete was also in band, Demolay, computer club, math club, German club, and UIL calculator competition. Oliver played baseball. Orel played basketball. Derah swam and went to car shows with her dad. Alice was in

National Honor Society, Spanish Honor Society, played flute, ran track and field and played basketball.

Not only were participants engaged in extracurricular activities at school and in the community, their choices contradict the stereotype of studious students as physically and socially awkward. However, these diverse and sustained interests and wide-ranging participation that participants' described in high school did not figure as large in their accounts of college.

Table 11

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Getting Involved and Pursuing Interests

Getting involved and pursuing interests
1. Engaged in high school
2. Social community
3. Impact of social group
4. Personal interests

While participants did not maintain the same breadth and level of activity as they did in high school, they did reported being engaged in a *social community* of one type or another in college. For Sallie, this community was composed of the neighbors she got to know when she moved off-campus. Mitchell and Pete found their places in ROTC and marching band, respectively. Alice also was in ROTC for part of her time in college and worked multiple jobs on and around campus. Derah found a community with students in a campus spirit activity. Oliver, Orel and Anne all referenced informal groups of friends that they engaged with socially.

Participant descriptions of the *impact of social groups* varied. The more highly-structured social groups such as the ROTC, marching band and the campus spirit activity seemed to have provided a more consistent base of support for Mitchell, Pete and Derah. Mitchell said that his experience as a director for a campus organization that brought performing arts shows to campus “was a formative experience that helped me realize for the first time that I was disorganized in how I ran almost all facets of my personal life.” In addition to being “eye-opening,” his social experience helped Mitchell become detail-oriented and organized, and provided a social education that included meeting Mikhail Gorbachev, smoking pot with Branford Marsalis, and seeing ballerinas change backstage.

Participants also described a range of *personal interests* including music and sports that have persisted into adulthood. Mitchell wanted to live near Austin to be close to the music scene. His band played at the internationally-acclaimed South-by-Southwest (SXSW) festival and opened for Third Eye Blind. Alice took flight lessons, has logged over 6,000 skydiving jumps, and has helped to train stuntmen for action films. Derah continued to nurture an interest in cars she developed with her father and began collecting classic cars. The wide range of activities reported by participants suggests that they sought out and maintained meaningful ways in which to socially interact in their communities.

Social-emotional Awareness and Agency

Self-perception of ability influences one’s feelings of having power to make decisions and effect change (Bandura, 1982). The social milieu in which these

participants grew up along with their interpretation of their experiences played a role in the chain of decisions that led to early college entrance. Examples of this framing are presented in Table 12.

Participants reported a variety of *social experiences before college*. Sallie, Mitchell and Pete described difficult family dynamics that influenced their decisions for early college entrance. Sallie said that she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder her senior year in high school and the ensuing struggle to find appropriate medication caused her not to be on good terms with her family. Mitchell said that his grandparents, who financed his education, were openly disrespectful of Mitchell's father and tolerated him only for the sake of Mitchell's mother. When Mitchell told his father about his plans to graduate early, his father was dismissive. Mitchell felt that this was because his father did not want him to "be out of his control." Mitchell remembered thinking to himself, "it's going to happen whether he likes it or not." Pete's home life was affected by his parent's alcoholism and separation.

Not all of the social experiences before college related by participants were negative. Oliver said that his parents' decision to send him to a private school for high school resulted in "less social pressure." While Orel was aloof in middle school and high school, he described himself as outgoing in elementary school. Orel attributed the shift in his personality to becoming aware of the difference in age between himself and classmates. He said "any kind of different treatment I received I ascribed to being young, even if they didn't know. I'd think, 'what is different about me?' and age was the only

difference. I think that made me less socially engaging and carried into my time at [College X].”

Table 12

Subcategories in the Overarching Category: Social-emotional Awareness and Agency

Social-emotional awareness and agency
1. Social experience before college
2. Sibling
3. Risky behavior
4. Bad choices
5. Time management
6. Different experience
7. Drinking in college
8. Social experience in college
9. Significant other
10. Family expectations, influence and support
11. Coping strategy
12. Perception of others
13. Learn through experience

Participants noted that *sibling* relationships played an important role in their lives before college. Pete and Anne indicated that their siblings were significantly older. In Anne’s case, these relationships helped her become more comfortable in large social groups. Mitchell and Derah had siblings that were slightly older and these relationships were more competitive. Alice had younger brothers and sisters that she helped care for. Alice also had a twin sister with whom she had a strained relationship with until she moved away to college, at which point her sister started “wanting to be a twin.”

Several participants described engaging in *risky behavior* prior to going away to college. Sallie linked her drug use and sexual promiscuity to the medication for her bipolar disorder. She noted, “my family thought I had turned into a different person.” Mitchell was self-aware enough to see himself “headed for trouble.” He turned down his grandparents’ offer of a car to delay college entrance because he saw graduation as his way out “before something bad happens” like getting somebody pregnant or getting into a wreck. Derah said that she “got in trouble like teenagers do.”

One of the biggest challenges for participants was mediating the adult contexts that accompanied independent living. Participants reflected on the decisions that they made and some concluded that they made “*bad choices*.” Sallie expressed this explicitly, “I wasn’t ready emotionally for college when I came,” she said. “I don’t feel there was any place for me in college, but wouldn’t have said that then.”

Mitchell described the challenge as learning *time management* and learning to “balance what was important.” “I had new freedoms,” he said. “I went from a very structured environment where I set goals to a wide-open schedule.” Derah was very disciplined with her time as she was working multiple jobs and going to school simultaneously. She said that she studied when she had twenty minutes between classes and took a nap in the afternoon instead of going to lab.

Half of the participants noted that they felt they had a *different experience* in college. Derah said, “I knew it was different for me than for other students.” Oliver felt that the college experience was different for him socially and emotionally. Alice noted

that she had “different challenges.” Mitchell said that he had never before had to take notes or listen to a lecture, so he had to learn those skills along with course material.

As the decision to accelerate a child is primarily based on their ability to handle advanced course work, the “soft” skills necessary to be successful in a college environment may be overlooked. Among these soft skills is an ability to self-regulate. Alcohol is often used as a social lubricant as it lowers inhibitions that might prevent social interaction. Traditionally-aged college students are notoriously bad at regulating their alcohol intake and early entrants can become caught up in a culture that promotes underage drinking. Unsurprisingly, *drinking in college* was a salient issue for early entrants. Oliver and Derah reported that they “found a way around being underage,” but Sallie and Alice reported abstaining. Derah said that she had decided not to drink in college but did immediately anyhow, suggesting that an a priori decision may not be a determining factor in predicting drinking behavior.

The biggest difference for participants was the *social experience in college*. Sallie described the disappointment she felt when the women she lived with her first semester in school did not form a closer community. Later, her roommates, including the boyfriend with whom she lived, left her alone at home when they went out. Sallie said that the experience was “different because of the way I chose to live my life.” Mitchell described sleeping with women and telling them he had no feelings for them. He said that his relationship with his wife started off the same way, but it “lasted long enough for real feelings to break through.” Pete described a hazing incident his freshman year that resulted in the death of a student in ROTC and subsequently lighter physical training.

Pete said that upperclassmen derided younger students for having an easier experience and he later enlisted in the Marines to prove himself. Pete returned to school with increased confidence. He said that his Marine Corps experience was very similar to the experience he had in ROTC, but with fewer “mind games.” Oliver fit in and had friends in college, but was especially awkward with women. He said that “everybody deals with awkwardness,” but that he was “behind socially and emotionally.” Orel noted that it was “nice emotionally to be living independently.”

Relationships with a *significant other* played a salient role in the narratives related by five of the participants. Sallie’s boyfriend throughout college dumped her two days before her graduation. She said that they are back together now and “happy on a day-to-day basis” but that she “wishes I hadn’t fallen in love with him at seventeen. My life could be so much more complete if I was with someone that had the same dreams and started at the same time in life.”

Pete broke off a relationship with his high school girlfriend because she was still in high school. He started dating another woman that he met at [a freshman orientation program] and characterized this relationship as “unhealthy.” The new girlfriend was “needy and escaping a very controlling boyfriend back home.” Pete explained, “I was helping her to manage her money. She actually lived in [the dorm] one semester with me. We would sneak her in after lights-out. We were doing a number of things we shouldn’t have been doing. Made a lot of bad decisions.”

Pete dealt with his own issues stemming from a family fracture. His father was seeing another woman and his mother and father separated after his mother discovered

the situation. Pete said, “I wasn’t calling home because I didn’t need to” but later learned that his mother called the university marching band director frequently without Pete’s knowledge. Pete felt that his experience as an early entrant to college was only different emotionally. He said the “intoxication” of having his first serious girlfriend is “an issue that any sixteen-year-old would have to deal with.” He said, “I don’t know if the experience was any different for me being sixteen going through it when others were nineteen. I don’t think so.”

Derah and Alice had different experiences of being young women on a college campus. Derah found unexpected protection in the form of two upperclassmen. These young men turned away guys who might otherwise have made advances. Derah embraced the nickname her powderpuff football team gave her, “jailbait.” She described the kind of protection the nickname and reputation afforded:

I was less conscious and afraid of things I’m aware of now like sexual predators and guys just being guys. It was a real advantage for me because I got to learn those things and not have it come out of a negative experience. It was like an out-of-body experience to see these things happen to other people and not have it happen to me. I was very fortunate.

Alice described several run-ins with campus authorities including a security guard that detained her on her way to work. She also related the story of being placed in a police car for violating a campus curfew. She said that off-campus students were no longer allowed on campus past 10:00 PM even though campus facilities, such as the library, were open till midnight. A campus police officer detained Alice one night while

she was headed to the library and the episode resulted in a public spectacle with Alice yelling screaming that she was not a criminal and Resident Advisors trying to explain to the officer that they knew her. The officer lost his job after Alice reported the incident to the Dean. She said, “there had been other complaints about this officer, but the students had been belligerent,” so her reputation as a quiet student carried more weight. Alice then described another, more serious assault by a campus employee:

I made another person lose his job. I can’t believe I was such a troublemaker!

This was when I was seventeen, in the first semester of my second year. The guy took care of the engine room while the ship was docked at [the college]. We had to do work hours on the ship and we would go to him for assignments, to clean or paint. He grabbed me and took me to his room and shut the door. I escaped and went to tell the student commanding officer. She didn’t believe me, so I went to the regular commanding officer. They offered [the assailant] early retirement.

Alice described that the stress of this incident caused her to drop out of school for a semester. She only agreed to come back to campus after the man was gone. Alice said that other women came forward later to offer similar statements. Alice said, “I can’t believe the student commanding officer wouldn’t support me, especially since she was a girl. I guess experiences like that help you deal with things later in life. Builds character.”

Family expectations, influence, and support provided an impetus for participants to achieve. Sallie and Anne reported that not going to college was not an option for them. Anne reported that her parents raised her to pursue financial stability and success

and reinforced academic success as the route to take. Her parents modeled hard work, and while Anne described their absence from her activities growing up, she said she would not change the experience. Anne's father said he did not want her to have to work in school so that she could focus on academics and be able to support herself afterwards. Pete said that his dad's gift of an Apple II computer led to his interest and career in computer science. Mitchell said that his becoming detail-oriented was influenced by his parents' "fly-by-the-seat-of-their-pants" nature. He said, "sometimes we do things as a reaction to the way things were for us." Derah and Alice mentioned holding jobs during college, but other participants were financially supported by their families.

ROTC was the defining activity for Mitchell's college experience. His grandfather thought Mitchell "needed[ed] to be taken down a notch" and promised to pay for college if Mitchell would stick out a semester in ROTC. Mitchell said that these low expectations motivated him to remain in ROTC. Mitchell said, "my freshman year, I got more wrapped up in ROTC than I did in school." He remembered that the people who definitively said they would not quit ROTC were the ones that did; "What kept me going was the thought that 'I might quit tomorrow, but not today.'"

Participants described developing ways to make it through the emotional strain of college. Mitchell said, "I was a mess emotionally, and still am in some ways." He described a *coping strategy* he learned growing up in which he would "imagine a shell, like a turtle, and stuff would bounce off." Alice said, "I got through some of my most difficult jobs... [by] count[ing] the dollar signs. In school, I'd count the credit hours."

Participants reported being influenced by the *perception of others*. Mitchell said that he was described as “exceptional” growing up. He said, “there’s something imprinted on you when people continually ask how you can work so hard.” This discernment of and responding to the expectations of others was reported by other participants as well. Anne said, “people always told me I’m going against all odds.” She said that the thought of having to go home and face the naysayers was a motivation to improve her grades and make it through college.

Participants describe various ways that they *learned through experience*. Participants demonstrated a desire to apply what they had learned about themselves in the future. Sallie was focused on working through the implications of her bipolar disorder. Mitchell described the impact of low expectations for math and science achievement and how he used this lesson to positively reinforce his children. Pete said he is “thankful for the freedom and independence” that he developed, though he would not give his children the same degree of freedom. Oliver said that he had a “sense of loss for possible growth” he might have experienced if he had not been accelerated, and will consider this in making decisions for his child.

Participants remained engaged in setting and reaching high goals for themselves in adulthood including success in business, early retirement, advanced degrees and ample time to spend with family. Participants seemed to have developed an ability to filter their emotional response through their lived experiences. Oliver noted:

I’ve always been older than my age. I don’t know if it’s arrogance or ignorance, but I’ve always had a clear idea about what is right and wrong, too. And until

recently I didn't have patience for people who didn't agree with what I thought was right. I've always chosen what was right. In retrospect, maybe I should have chosen differently.

The maturity required to objectively consider the nuance of exceptionality, select what is good about the experience and to critically assess what could be better was evident in most of these participants.

Embedded Contexts: The Social-Emotional Milieu of Early College

The overarching categories derived from participants' narratives can be used to describe how these participants experienced giftedness: a social context that provided high educational expectations, an educational context that provided enriched and accelerated academic preparation, and an internal social-emotional context that provided a sense of that they could successfully solve problems on their own. Figure 3 illustrates these embedded contexts which recursively inform each other to provide the academic achievement and sense of agency necessary for early college entrance. High achievement expectations led to accelerated and enriched academic preparation which, in turn, generated a social-emotional feeling of difference, both of being special and of being alien. As Mitchell noted, "there's something imprinted" when a gifted person is constantly the subject of high expectations and recognition of achievement. This illustration is not linear but is directional in that there is influence from the outermost context through the other contexts it circumscribes. The feedback effect from the embedded contexts resulted in higher expectations, more and better academic preparation, and stronger feelings of specialness and strangeness.

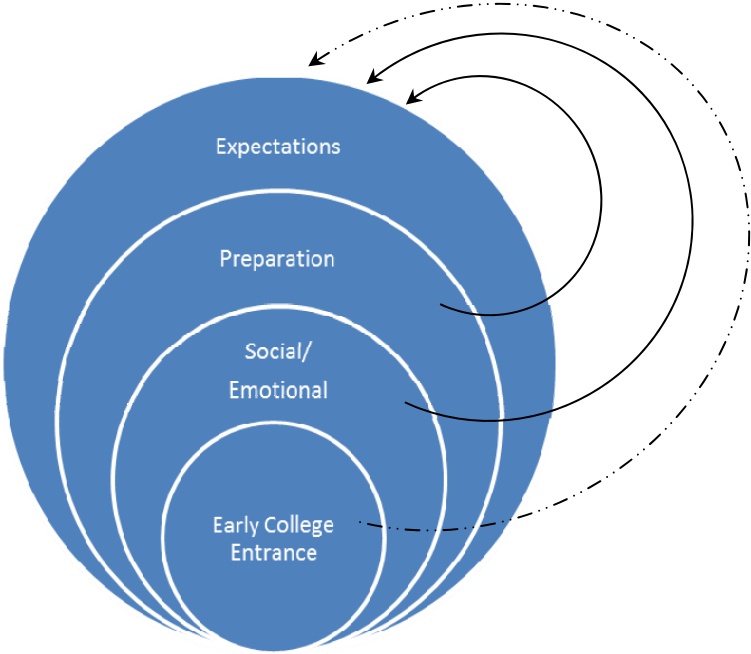
The following explains how the embedded contexts figure illustrates the categories previously described:

The gifted participants in this study were exposed to a context of high educational expectations. Initially, these expectations were informed by the education level and experiences of their grandparents, parents, and siblings. Later, expectations were also influenced by their own educational preparation and social-emotional experiences. These high educational expectations led to seeking appropriate educational preparation. Education options included early kindergarten start, enrichment in and out of school, grade skipping, and finishing high school early. This additional educational preparation led to internal and external expectations of continued academic success in an accelerated setting. Acceleration created a different social-emotional awareness for participants. This social-emotional difference was experienced internally as complex thought and heightened sensitivity (asynchrony). The social-emotional difference was experienced externally as feeling out of step with societal norms (dyssynchrony). Finding success in an accelerated setting also cultivated expectations of sustained high performance. The achievement and agency necessary for early college entrance were a result of the high expectations, accelerated and enriched academic preparation, and qualitatively different social-emotional awareness participants experienced. While the figure is recursive, early entrance to college resulted in a mismatch amongst students' expectations, level of preparation, and feelings of agency. Participants unexpectedly found that success in college required more than academic ability, and instead of seeking help to address gaps in preparation, they sought to "figure it out" for themselves. This

feedback was different than that received during high school, and may have resulted in lower expectations, selecting less challenging curricular options, and decreased academic self-concept. Participants' formed opinions about their experience of acceleration in school and in early college entrance. These opinions affected whether or not participants would recommend the early college entrance for others, including their own children.

Figure 3

Embedded Contexts of the Experience of Early College Entrance. The experience of early college entrance is situated within each of these contexts, and the contexts recursively inform each other. The process breaks down in college because of decreased academic self-concept.



Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note “Dewey held that one criterion of experience is *continuity*, namely, the notion that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences (p. 2). Figure 1 illustrates this continuity of experience as embedded contexts. Home experience influences school experience and school experience influences academic self-concept. These various contexts thus shaped these participants’ experience of early college entrance.

A hierarchy of these contexts is illustrated in Figure 3 by enclosing each successive context in the previous one: expectations influence preparation, preparation influences social/emotional experiences, and social/emotional experiences influence the decision to and experience of early college entrance. These contexts, in turn, recursively influence the contexts in which they are embedded. Categories are not embedded in contexts. Instead, these are themes that flow across context borders. The categories flow between contexts as illustrated in Figure 4.

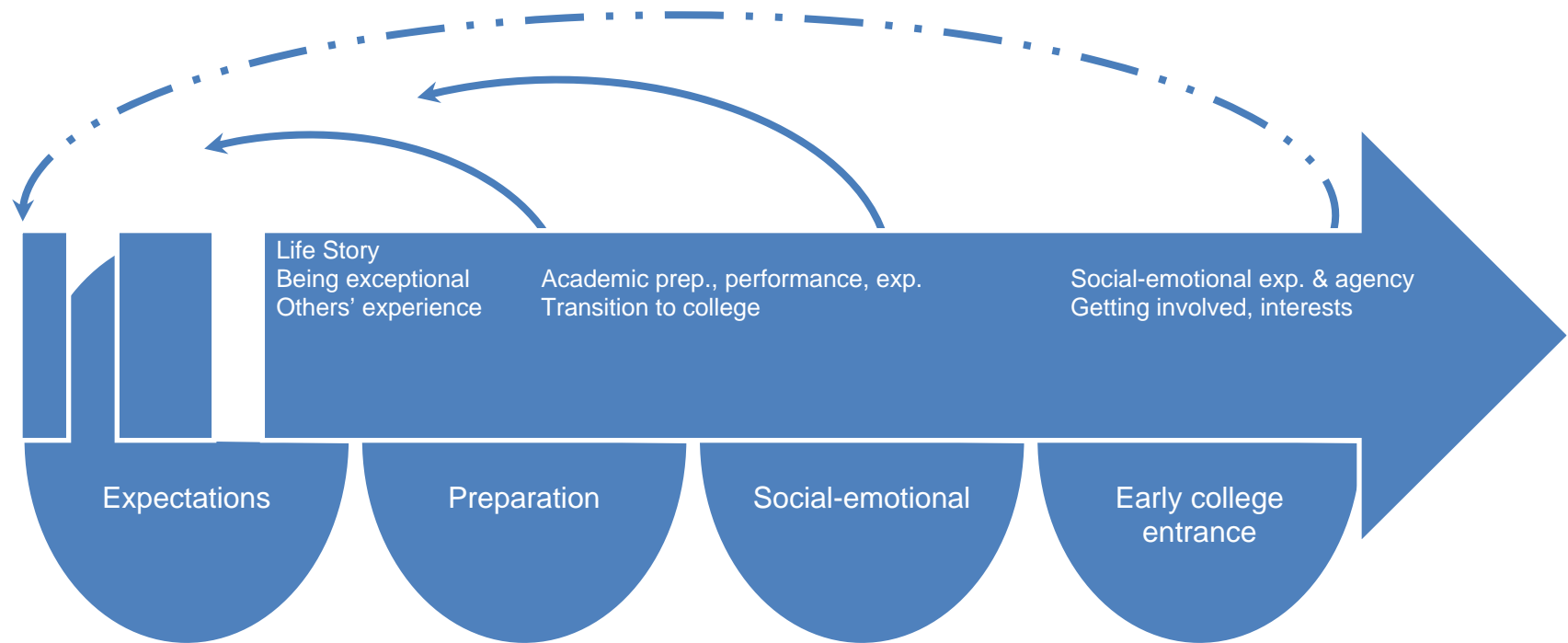


Figure 4. Category Themes Flow through Contexts. Overarching categories grow out of the outermost context and flow into the embedded contexts.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the process of early college entrance directly from participants' reported experiences. The three objectives that accompanied the research question were to 1) formulate a description of the experience of early college entrance, 2) explore the reasons for and process of deciding to enter college early, and 3) determine if and how participants' understanding of giftedness affected their decision to enter college early.

The decision of these participants to enter college early did not seem to be well-examined. Participants either were following an academic track they had begun at an early age or were responding to unsatisfactory conditions in their high school curricula or environments. Participants had an initially difficult experience with their college-level academics as most had not previously experienced significant academic challenge. This lack of academic preparation prompted some participants to reevaluate their academic effort, change majors, and improve their grades. This was accomplished largely through an independent strategy of "figuring it out," without help from faculty, mentors, or parents. Participants sought involvement in a community, whether formally organized or informally composed of friends, but had access to restricted social experiences because of their youth. Romantic relationships were complicated by age difference and strong feelings of attachment. Participants understood giftedness as academic achievement. However, this unidimensional understanding of giftedness did not serve them well in understanding the social-emotional implications of being a young college student.

Nevertheless, participants were ultimately successful in completing college and moving on to meaningful careers.

Findings of this study indicate that acceleration was a complicated decision and that asynchrony was a useful model for explaining participants' experience. Finally, results suggest that participants in this study had an inadequate social-emotional framework for understanding the context of college. The results of this study support and extend previous research on early college entrance, asynchrony, and academic self-concept. These theoretical constructs will be used to discuss the results in this chapter. Implications and recommendations of this study then will be presented, followed by the study limitations.

Discussion

Acceleration. Acceleration options such as early kindergarten and early college entrance have been shown to be effective for the academic achievement of gifted students (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004; Robinson, 2004). The results of this study similarly suggest that acceleration was an appropriate academic choice for these participants. While participants in this study spoke of academic performance in college that was, at times, below their own and parents' expectations, they were all ultimately successful in completing college, finding meaningful work, and continuing to challenge themselves as adults.

The findings of this study also illustrate that acceleration for gifted students can take place at different points during the trajectory of a school career. The literature on acceleration indicates that early entry to school is less disruptive than other acceleration

options (Robinson, 2004). Half of the participants in this study began kindergarten early, two as young as age three. Some participants were considered “ready” for school based on their early reading and verbal skills. The participants who were accelerated early adapted to expectations for the grade level in which they were placed and excelled academically. As Orel noted, being ahead was “normal” for him. Half of the participants in this study were accelerated through finishing high school early. In at least two cases, the decision to graduate high school early was self-initiated in response to dissatisfaction with the high school experience. Robinson (2004) makes a distinction between early high school graduates and those who skip some or all of college through a special early college program. She notes that students who graduate high school early usually manage the process independently and that the experience is generally positive for them (Robinson, 2004). Participants in this study did not participate in a special early college program. And, although they noted some difficulty in their transition to college, none indicated they felt that their college experience was negative.

Decisions about acceleration were affected by moves between schools, especially state-to-state moves. This dimension of acceleration is not addressed in the previous literature on acceleration. Half of the participants described a move from one state to another. These participants described that how acceleration was managed facilitated their early college entrance. Pete noted that the timing of his birthday allowed him to enter kindergarten a year earlier in his new school than would have been allowed in his home state. Differences in state and school policies presented participants’ parents with the choice to either accelerate or hold back their children. For example, Pete noted that his

parents agreed to promote him from 1st to 3rd grade but when his family moved back to their home state, it was questioned whether or not he would be allowed to continue in the 4th grade. His parents advocated to prevent him from being held back. Parental education may have played a role in these acceleration decisions as many of these parents were themselves highly educated.

It is not clear if early college entrance was the best choice or simply the only choice for these participants. This is another dimension of acceleration that is not explicitly addressed in the literature. The series of embedded contexts described in Figures 3 and 4 illustrate how expectations for achievement led participants' parents to seek out accelerated and enriched educational options. The success associated with advanced educational preparation created a sense of agency in these participants, which recursively influenced their own expectations. Personal preferences, career goals, family influence, and intensified expectations created a path of narrowed options for participants prior to entering college. As Oliver observed, "if not [early college entrance], what?" Parents and educators did not seem to have had a clear plan for these students' academic acceleration. Participants were identified as having exceptional ability and were motivated to excel but their underachievement during the first years of college suggests that there was a disconnect between these high expectations and their actual performance in college. Daniels and Piechowski (2009) describe how the emotional intensity and inner conflict in Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration can describe academic recovery:

The search for self-knowledge entails inner struggles, doubts, and even despair about one's emotional, psychological, and spiritual shortcomings, yet it always leads back again to the process of gaining greater understanding of others, ridding oneself of prejudices, and becoming more self-determined in achieving one's inner ideal," (p. 16).

Participants experienced conflict between their performance and academic self-concept, but instead of questioning their ability, this conflict fueled an inner drive for improvement.

Asynchrony. The results of this study suggest that asynchrony is a useful model for explaining gifted participants' experiences with early college entry. Asynchrony describes an internal state of uneven development (see Figures 1 & 2) in which greater cognitive capacity allows for more intense emotional response (Morelock, 1992, 1996). The result of this asynchrony is that a gifted person is more sensitive to stimuli and has a more intense experience of the world (Silverman, 1994, 1997, 2002). Roeper (1982) similarly describes giftedness as "greater awareness [and] sensitivity" and an enhanced ability to "transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences" (p. 21). Participants in this study expressed both emotional sensitivity and cognitive intensity in their interviews. Alice described trying to learn the names of all the students on her college campus, which was smaller than the high school she attended. When several classmates died, Alice stopped trying to learn their names, she said "they were only nineteen while I was sixteen, and I thought: 'Oh! It might be a curse and I had the potential to die or know more people who die at nineteen! It was just too sad.'" Almost

all participants disclosed personal emotional experiences in unusual detail. Sallie described her life in college as revolving around her boyfriend. Despite some possible damaging consequences from continuing the relationship, Sallie described her relationship as “happy on a day-to-day basis.” She said, “I wonder, though, if I hadn’t fallen in love with him if I would have met someone who was in the same place that I was,” suggesting that Sallie’s happiness was complex. Feelings such as Sallie’s would be difficult even for an older and more experienced person. The relative ease with which these participants extracted themselves from academic trouble stood in contrast to the difficulty they had in negotiating social-emotional contexts. Participants evaluated their efforts and felt responsible to improve when confronted with academic challenge for the first time in college. The great effort these participants made to improve their academic performance and their search for curricula that better fit their interests are examples of the cognitive intensity fueled by their sensitivity. Ackerman (2009) notes that emotional sensitivity can be expressed as strong feelings of self-evaluation and responsibility, and cognitive intensity can be expressed as capacity for intellectual effort and a search for understanding. This search for meaning and understanding is also evident in the how participants’ interests have directed their career choices. Sallie is pursuing graduate work in counseling to help homeless and battered women. Sallie was particularly interested in this group as they had different problems than people who could afford help. Mitchell’s intense interest was in approaching complex systems as puzzles. He gave examples of learning to play music (describing “music is math”) and in his work in logistics. Orel’s epistemological and ontological intensity, expressed in his

interview as wondering “why things are presented the way they are,” led to sociological work in evaluation.

The psychological difference of giftedness has continued to persist across the lifespan. Participants in this study agreed that they felt exceptional as adults. Their collective career successes and educational attainment supports this self-perception. Moreover, participants indicated evidence from coworkers and supervisors such as Pete’s ability to sell any product and Derah’s increasing administrative responsibility that were exceptional. Participants exemplified the traits of divergency, excitability, and sensitivity that Lovecky (1986) described by maintaining diverse interests, seeking additional challenge in their careers, and exhibiting concern for others. While participants did not express regret with respect to unfulfilled potential in adulthood as described in the literature (Betts, 1986; Lovecky, 1986; Perrone, Perrone, Ksiazak, Wright & Jackson, 2007; Fiedler, 2013), they did express a feeling of difference.

Participants cited social-emotional competency as an important component of being an exceptional adult. Oliver noted that intelligence, common sense, and the ability to get along with people “is what will get you places.” He said, “I think to be truly gifted, as an adult, you have to be able to translate your expertise to anyone in a way they’ll understand.” Derah cited her “analytical capability partnered with social capability” as an example of her exceptionality as an adult. As adults, these participants displayed social-emotional maturity in that they were self-aware, self-monitoring, and had successfully developed close mature attachments to others in their lives. Their reports contrast with their reports of difficulties in developing mature social relationships

during college. These responses suggest that a developmental issue for adolescents who enter college early may be resolving the internal asynchrony they encounter amongst their cognitive, emotional, and social selves.

Academic self-concept: a framework to understand college. One of the most curious aspects of the results was what was missing from the narratives. Participants in this study did not begin college with a suitable framework for success. The process described in the embedded contexts illustration (see Figure 3) broke down soon after their arrival at college. Prior to college, participants found that academic success required very little effort from them. College success, in contrast, depended on engagement. Engagement is described by McCormick and Plucker (2013) as containing an interaction of behavioral, cognitive, and affective components. While participants were engaged outside of the classroom in high school, they had not needed the affective component to succeed academically. An engaged student who is “invested in the learning process” and someone who “see[s] the value of what they are doing in school” (McCormick & Plucker, 2013, p. 123), participants described themselves as making minimal effort or not having clear direction during their first years of college. For example, Mitchell stated that working above the minimum required to pass was “wasted effort.” McCoach & Siegle (2003) suggest that a key difference between gifted achievers and gifted underachievers are the goals they set for themselves and the effort they put toward those goals. In some circumstances, demonstrating minimum effort may have been a coping mechanism for some of the gifted participants in this study.

Participants in this study seemed to misunderstand the context of college. They assumed that college would be similar to high school, a context for which they had figured out successful strategies. However, success in college entailed an integration of cognitive and social-emotional abilities that participants were initially unable to master. Anne's admission that she did not think grades would matter in college and that she did not apply herself is an example of this. She said "Was [College X] much harder? If I had gone to class, maybe not." Participants did not seem particularly bothered by the mixed success of this first stage of their college careers and described their struggles in a matter-of-fact manner. Participants eventually did, however, "figure it out" and successfully complete college. As Anne pointed out in her narrative, many traditionally-aged students encounter academic difficulty and do not recover. Instead, all of the participants in this study were ultimately successful in that they found majors that fit their interests, became motivated to succeed, and completed their degrees.

Misunderstanding of their own giftedness led participants to miss opportunities for growth. Participants described themselves benefitting from a number of opportunities, but did not seem aware of how their intelligence, personalities, and preparation often positioned them to take advantage of these opportunities. Participants reported they were unsatisfied with their own achievement early in college, attributing this lack of achievement to insufficient academic preparation and low motivation. In a study on the motivation of gifted university students, Hammond, McBee & Herbert (2007) identified a "culture of achievement" and early academic and extracurricular success which "led to a type of 'feedback loop' that allowed psychological and social

benefits to accrue” (p. 203). While the participants in this study did not benefit from a “culture of achievement,” they did create their own positive feedback by figuring out a better curricular fit. Both Pete and Orel reported that their grades improved after changing majors and finding a better academic fit. Whereas these participants had previously had a positive academic self-concept despite putting forth little effort, the unexpected challenge of college academics challenged these participants’ academic self-concept. They even questioned their own giftedness in the process. This finding supports literature that indicates that academic underachievement can undermine academic self-concept (Rinn, Plucker & Stocking, 2010). While participants in this study were matter-of-fact about entering and completing college, they were surprised when they experienced academic challenge and had to reevaluate their academic self-concepts.

Participants’ history of high achievement initially masked their need for social-emotional support in the college context. They confronted challenges in college without the guidance or mentorship of a faculty member, knowledgeable staff member, or even an older peer. These participants sought to “figure it out” on their own, a strategy that had worked for them in the past. One wonders how much more successful these participants might have been had their initial college experience been better supported.

Implications and Recommendations

Impact of the decision. There are risks associated with the decision to academically accelerate a child. Prospective early entrants and their parents should temper their decision with the knowledge that an early start to college is a life-altering decision. Among the risks associated with early college entrance is a potential mismatch

between academic preparation and the rigor required by a college. This risk could be mitigated by ensuring that the prospective early entrant is prepared through a challenging curriculum (Noble et al., 2007). Another risk is that of becoming socially isolated. This risk could be mitigated through cohort programs or faculty or staff advisors knowledgeable about the unique needs of gifted early entrants (Noble, Robinson, & Gunderson, 1993; Noble et al., 2007).

Also recommended is further research and dissemination on the potential impacts of acceleration and early college entrance. This study suggests that more work remains in understanding the experience of early college entrance. Early college entrants' attitudes and expectations about their experiences before, during, and after college should be studied to understand how these attitudes and expectations change over time. As Oliver noted, the decision for acceleration is often made years in advance of college and the future implications of this decision might not be clear to parents at that point. Creating a repository of information could help parents fully consider acceleration options for their gifted children. This information might also be useful to high school students deciding whether to accelerate to college, as well as for counselors and psychologists who might be advising such students.

The results of this study suggest that while the native cognitive ability of a gifted early entrant might be sufficient to complete college, additional social-emotional supports are needed to realize the full potential of intellectual giftedness. Despite finishing college and pursuing fulfilling graduate and career opportunities, participants expressed a sense of regret for not living up to their own academic expectations during

their early years of college. And, while some participants described beneficial interactions with faculty, participants did not mention having had helpful mentoring in college. However, participants who were involved in organized extracurricular activities did express greater satisfaction with their college experience. Further research about the types, availability, and success of social-emotional supports for gifted college students is recommended.

Impact on self-concept. Information on giftedness, especially asynchronous development, might give gifted early college entrants a framework to contextualize their successes and failures. Research suggests that academic self-concept is a positively associated with achievement, though there is some disagreement about whether or not this relationship is caused by achievement or is the cause of achievement (McCoach & Siegle, 2003; Rinn, Plucker & Stocking, 2010). Current research suggests that discussion about academic self-concept should be broadened to encompass a range of affective influences (Rinn, Plucker & Stocking, 2010; Flint, 2010). Further, understanding Dabrowski's overexcitabilities as having the potential to function as either "energies" or "enemies" can give gifted early college entrants a tool to self-monitor and self-regulate (J. Juntune, personal communication, Spring 2003).

Given that these participants had an ambivalent attitude toward their own gifted identity, research on if and how difference in gifted self-identification plays a role in social adaptation to college is also indicated. In conjunction with the Pygmalion Effect described by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), the embedded contexts illustration (see

Figure 3) in this study suggests that stronger self-identification as gifted would lead to greater feelings of efficacy.

Gifted early entrants should be aware that their intellectual abilities can overshadow their need for social-emotional support (Sanborn, 1979). Anne and Oliver both noted that they had been described as mature for their youth. An early entrant's coping mechanism of listening and observing in situations that are unfamiliar might be mistaken by others for maturity. A gifted early entrant actually might not have the social competencies presumed to accompany their maturity. Gifted early entrants should be coached by their parents or teachers that asking for help is not a sign of weakness or incompetency (Flint, 2010).

Making plans and seeking guidance. Gifted early college entrants would be well-served by carefully considering their life goals and how they expect their college experience to help them meet those goals. The author advises university Honors students who seek additional challenge and enrichment as part of their undergraduate experiences. One of the researcher's colleagues jokingly remarked that some students are exceptional because they frequently require exceptions. In a broad sense, this claim might be made for anyone: that the ideal experience for each person is idiosyncratic. In the case of an exceptional student—someone who wants to take course work from three different majors to equip them for a research project that needs to be accomplished abroad and is narrowly focused on the niche career the student is pursuing—accommodations are often a necessity instead of a nicety. Advising such students almost always entails having a conversation about how their multiple—and sometimes mutually

exclusive—expectations might narrow their options and they might need to prioritize their goals.

Gifted early entrants would benefit from a mentor relationship, preferably with a faculty member. Mitchell's experience with a faculty member that took interest in his education was an exception. Robinson (2004) notes that early college entrants are not likely to find special supports when they transition to college. Unless an early entrant finds that their college has a built-in process for assigning mentors, he will need to proactively seek out a mentor. This can be accomplished by carefully attending to which professors have research or subject matter interests congruent with those of the early entrant. Some schools have established programs to match willing faculty and staff members with students seeking mentors.

Gifted early college entrants with gifted parents should be encouraged to seek advice and help from them. As indicated by participant reports, gifted early college entrants often become parents of gifted children and can draw on their own experiences in providing guidance. The reports of gifted parents of gifted children were a fascinating and unexpected outcome of this study, and more research on this phenomenon is recommended.

Limitations

As a qualitative study with a small group of participants, these results are not intended to be generalized. Rather, the results of this study offer insight to the unique experiences of highly gifted students. The thick description given in Chapter 4 is intended to provide congruency between the context of this study and other contexts.

Second, while the recruited participants represented both gender and chronological diversity, the sample is homogenous in other respects. These participants represented middle to upper class, well-educated individuals. As a complete survey of early college entrants was outside of the scope of this project, additional research would provide a larger picture of this population. Finally, as recruitment was conducted through two intermediaries, the researcher could not directly contact all students who matriculated to the target college at age sixteen or earlier. As a result, the prospective participants that contacted the researcher were all aged sixteen when they started college. Students who began college earlier than sixteen might have a different experience either with respect to type or intensity. Potential participants were limited to the 75 that the alumni association had current email addresses. Contact information for all 200 who were on the original list generated might have resulted in a broader sample.

Conclusion

The study describes early college entrants who grew up in contexts that provided high expectations for academic achievement and enriched curricula. Because participants moved from heterogeneous learning environments with less academic competition to a more homogeneous learning environment, they experienced—some for the first time—academic struggle and reported feeling underprepared by their high school curricula. Participants were accustomed to figuring out issues for themselves and were therefore unwilling or unable to seek help dealing with their struggles. Despite struggling and not seeking help, participants were ultimately successful in completing college and in adulthood found meaningful work that was related to their interests.

The overarching question in the present study was “what is it like to be an early college entrant?” The embedded contexts illustration (see Figure 3) developed in this study suggests that high academic expectations, access to academic preparation, and positive social-emotional adjustment influence each other recursively. Early college entrants are at risk for underachievement in college when they are academically underprepared or lack the support of a mentor or guide. Entering college without adequate support can undermine academic self-concept.

The results of this study supports previous research that while acceleration is a preferred academic intervention for gifted students, factors that may lead underachievement should be considered by parents and college administrators (Colangelo, Assouline & Gross, 2004). Early college entrants would benefit from a comprehensive early entrance program that would provide a system of social support and social-emotional coaching in addition to academic acceleration.

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APPENDIX A

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW

1. Tell me about yourself. How did you get here?
2. Describe your education before you were identified as gifted.
3. When were you identified as “gifted”?
4. Describe your education after you were identified as gifted.
5. Do you think that your definition of giftedness differs substantially from that of teachers or administrators with whom you have worked?
6. What does the word “gifted” mean, in your experience?
7. What led to your decision to enroll at [College X]?
8. What factors influenced your decision to enroll when you did?
9. Describe your intellectual experience at [College X].
10. Describe your social/emotional experience at [College X].
11. Describe your physical experience at [College X].
12. Reflecting on the whole of your experience at [College X], do you think that your experience was any different than that of other students?

APPENDIX B

TEXT OF STUDY INVITATION EMAIL

Dear [name]:

Over the last fifty years about 200 students like you have entered Texas A&M University as full-time students at age 16 or younger. By virtue of the academic focus and achievement necessary to accomplish such a feat, you may have had contact with the University Honors Program during your undergraduate careers.

I am writing to recruit early college entrants to a dissertation study conducted by Mr. Jonathan Kotinek. Mr. Kotinek is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of Educational Psychology and the Associate Director for the University Honors Program. His dissertation study is investigating how gifted students such as yourself decided to enroll early and where and how they found support for their transition to college.

The participation criteria for the study are:

1. Key (primary) Participants: (a) were identified as highly-gifted at the middle-school level, (b) became full-time college students at age 16 or younger, (c) no longer undergraduate students at Texas A&M University, (d) aged 18 or above at the time of the study, and (e) be available for interview during study timeline.
2. Additional (secondary) Participants are parents, teachers, and administrators identified by primary participants as persons with information relevant to the case being studied.

University records indicate that you might fit the criteria for participation in this study. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact the Primary Investigator, Mr. Jonathan Kotinek at jkotinek@tamu.edu. Potential participants will be sent an information sheet, consent form and pre-screening questionnaire.

If you are not interested in participating in this study, please disregard this message.

Thank you!