Keeping Their Talents Alive: Young Women's Assessment of Radical, Post-Secondary Acceleration

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Raina K. Smyth

Twenty-seven of the 20 young women who entered the University of Washington's Early-Reach Program (ERP) between 1989 and 1990 completed 60-70% of a 4-year academic program in 2 years. Much asked why they chose early college entrance, whether gender played a role in their decision, and how few and others attempted to explain themselves were affected by their participation in the ERP. They were asked about their perceptions of themselves as educational and work environment; the values and skills that guided their educational process; and, relational decisions, and whether they thought their early college entrance had been a help or a hindrance to their goals. Results indicated that although gender did not factor in most participants' decision to enroll in the ERP, young women drove a number of unique benefits from early college, including a rare confluence of acceptance and encouragement that is crucial to young women's success. Journal on Education, 1994, 44(1), 44-50.

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The transition from adolescence to early adulthood is a critical period for gifted young women. Societal ambivalence about gender roles leads many to believe they must make a choice between being smart or being attractive and socially valuable. As a result, some young women forgo opportunities to participate in academically challenging programs. Over the years, a number of programs have evolved to promote the development of young women, particularly in non-technical fields like mathematics and science. McCormick and Wolf (1993) provided an overview of several of these programs (e.g., Project REACH, Expanding Your Horizons, Math, M.S., and Multiplying Options: Saturating Bias) and reported on their success as measured by both longevity and proliferation. They caution, however, that gifted girls...

September 1994. Roos Review Volume 18, Number 1, Copyright © 1995, P.O. Box 129, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48030. Reprinted with permission of the Roos Review.
that may have reflected a mismatch with the particular residential program (Cornell, Calkins, & Loyd, 1991).

Richardson and Besebro (1990) conducted an extensive follow-up study of over 2000 2-year to 4-year old students who scored in the top 10% on a national mathematics achievement test and at the level of bright students four to five years older in the SATs, and who were encouraged to accelerate their education in a variety of ways. They assessed students' social development at ages 18 and 23 using extensive self-report questionnaires which asked about their education, career aspirations, family background, employment history, friendships, and openness about acceleration. Richardson and Bebra found that, overall, students felt quite good about themselves and about their lives, and said they suffered no detrimental effects from skipping grades or taking college-level courses while they were still in middle or high school. “Greater occurrence of accelerations were not related to greater amounts of social and emotional difficulties” (p. 467).

Furthermore, more females than males reported that acceleration had positive effects on their self-esteem.

We have found this favorable picture (to be true in the Early Entrance Program (EEP) at the University of Washington. Each year the EEP accepts 16 bright, motivated, and highly disciplined students, maximum age 16, into the “Transition School”, a one-year preparatory program that prepares them for full-time enrollment in the University the following year. When asked in a qualitative study (Richardson & Drummond, 1992) why they chose to accelerate, both females and male students described how difficult it was for them to do without their intelligent peers in junior or senior high school. How forced and lonely they felt in those environments, and how free they were to be themselves at the University. A recent follow-up study of former early entrants who had enrolled in the EEP between 1977 and 1986 found that those who had elected to skip high school and proceed directly to college were quite happy, psychosocially healthy, and satisfied with their lives in a way that was equal to their peers who had chosen to remain in high school (Richardson & Gunawardena, 1993). Not only did early college entrance provide many early college entrants with new opportunities, but they also reported that they had experienced the joys and possibilities of their intellectual potential, but both females and males proceeded to graduate or professional school in greater numbers than did either of the comparison groups. These groups included National Merit Scholarship finalists, individuals who had been accepted into the EEP but elected instead to go to high school, and students who had been in the EEP and not to enroll in the University. Noble, Robinson, and Gunawardena compared the acceleration was particularly beneficial for females, apparently because it allowed them (or by past a secondary school social status that is often detrimental to female intellectual development and to develop and display their abilities in a supportive and nurturing environment” (p. 130). Thus, study, however, did not indicate any gender differences on this issue. The present study was therefore designed again to assess female early entrants about the effect of accelerated upon their goals, aspirations, and sense of self, and whether they would recommend it as an option for other highly capable young women.

Method

Participants

The 30 young women, who had completed the Transition School and enrolled in the University of Washington’s Early Entrance Program between 1984 and 1992 were invited to join the investigation. None had participated in the 1992 follow-up study. A better explanation the investigation was sent to all eligible participants, along with a questionnaire. Twenty-seven students (90%) responded, a rate exceeded by securing one follow-up request to all prospective participants.

Procedure

A 25-step questionnaire was developed which contained open-ended questions with Likert scale response items. The questions were designed to elicit information about why young women might choose early college entrance, whether gender played a role in their decision, and how their and their father's attitudes were affected by their participation in the EEP. Respondents were also asked about their perception of sex in college and how men and women view themselves, the values and dreams that guided their educational, professional, and relational decisions, and whether they thought that college entrance that they had been a help or a hindrance to their goals. The questionnaire was piloted with several students prior to its administration.

Results

Undergraduate Education

At the time of this study, all but five of the students were undergraduate students whose majors fields of study were evenly distributed among the humanities, social sciences, and physical or life sciences. Three students were double majoring in science and a humanities or a social science. Five remaining respondents had recently graduated, one was in graduate school in physics, one was in medical school, and three were working. Twenty participants (74%) claimed that gender played a role in their decision to enroll in the EEP. Although one student said she might have been less interested in high school but she might have been more interested in college classes. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

Twenty-one students (90%) believed that they had made the right decision to skip high school and enter the EEP. Only one student said that after having been a university student for three years, “the benefits of being ahead of my peers academically don’t outweigh the disadvantages of being so much younger than the other students in my classes and social activities.” (Sixteen percent felt that high

Demographic Information

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total n = 27</th>
<th>Responses Returned</th>
<th>Responses Not Returned</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>15.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age Group</td>
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<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Level Education</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Data was not collected on the following category: Mother’s Education.*
Undergraduate Education

Current Educational Status:
- Undergraduate Student: 22 (82%)
- Graduate Student: 4 (14%)
- Professional Student: 2 (4%)
- No Longer a Student: 2 (11%)

Undergraduate Field of Study:
- Undeclared: 4 (14%)
- Human Science: 5 (19%)
- Social Science: 6 (30%)
- Distance Major: 3 (11%)
- Missing Data: 3 (11%)

Would you have made the same decision to select high school as you entered the EEP if you had been male?
- Yes: 20 (74)
- No: 2 (6)
- Missing: 8 (29)

Do you think you made the right decision?
- Yes: 24 (90)
- No: 4 (14)
- Missing: 2 (8)

Would you be willing to do it again?
- Yes: 20 (74)
- No: 5 (18)
- Missing: 8 (29)

I would have been just as motivated to develop my potential if I had gone to high school:
- Strongly Agree: 3 (11)
- Somewhat Agree: 4 (14)
- Somewhat Disagree: 1 (5)
- Strongly Disagree: 1 (5)

Mean: 2.65
SD: 1.06

Table 2

How do you feel that teachers treated female and male students?
- Treated Females Better, S=Same, TS=Treated Males Better

Mean SD
- Treated English Teacher: 2.77 59
- Treated History Teacher: 2.95 46
- Treated Math Teacher: 3.26 45
- Treated Physics Teacher: 2.31 100
- Treated Women Faculty: 3.26 60
- Treated Male Faculty: 2.62 64

Table 3

Perceptions ofFaculty Treatment

Respondents’ perceptions of treatment by Transverse School, Early Entrance, and University faculty were mixed. Two believed that females received better treatment by Early Entrance staff, and three others believed that males received better treatment by the Transverse School, six of whom cited male favoritism by the physics instructor as the problem. Two of these respondents attributed this differential treatment to their perception that the best students in physics were usually male. One commented that it could very well be that my own sense of weakness made me feel as though the boys were getting more attention. Or perhaps in our group there were more males who happened to excel in physics.”

Perceptions ofParental Attitudes Toward Participants

Parents were generally perceived as very supportive of their daughters’ decision to accelerate their education, although mothers were perceived as slightly less supportive than fathers. All respondents believed that acceleration positively changed their parents’ attitudes toward them, particularly in terms of their independence and ability to work hard. Twenty-six respondents (96%) perceived their parents’ academic expectations to be high or very high, 23 (95%) felt similarly about their parents’ professional expectations, although as one student said, “This isn’t to say my parents put pressure on me, but just knowing my capabilities, assume that I will achieve highly.”

Table 4: Parental Attitudes and Support

For the 18 participants, 3 were supported, 6 were unsupervised, and 9 were unsupervised. Mother Mean: 1.81 SD: 0.74
Father Mean: 1.26 SD: 0.56

How do your parents support your parents’ decision to enter the EEP?
- Strongly Support: 5
- Moderately Support: 5
- Strongly Oppose: 5
- No Support: 5

Table 4

How would you rate your parents’ expectations of you:
- Very High: 3
- Average: 3
- Low: 3

Academically: Mean: 1.37 SD: 0.56
Nonacademically: Mean: 1.63 SD: 1.04

As a result of participating in the EEP, I:
- Strongly improved in skills (Strongly Agree: 3 Strongly disagree: 0)
- My parents have greater appreciation and understanding of my abilities:
- My peers have greater appreciation and understanding of my abilities:
- My parents have greater appreciation and understanding of my abilities:

Mean: 0.93 SD: 0.93

I appreciate and understand my abilities better:
- I have become more confident socially:
- I have higher expectations of myself:

Mean: 0.89 SD: 0.89

I feel better about myself:

Mean: 0.79 SD: 0.79

Table 4

Self-Perceptions

As Table 4 suggests, respondents’ perception of their own level of ability was, they thought, most powerfully affected by their participation in the EEP. Early entrance also made them feel more confident socially, and appear more generally to enhance the perceptions of peers and family members as well. One respondent complained, however, that her peers “think I am smarter than I am when they learn that I entered college.”
Value and Goals

Our open-ended question asked respondents what they hoped to accomplish in their lives, both personally and professionally. Participants cited financial independence most frequently (40%), followed by happiness, emotional security, and life satisfaction (33%), finding a spouse and having children (26%), and earning doctoral degrees (26%). Individual professional goals included becoming a concert pianist, a physician, a scientist, and an environmental engineer. One respondent expressed her goal this way: "I want to be in a leadership position, to feel that I am using my skills and knowledge, to design some relationships to have a helpfulness, strong family, and to continue growing and learning."

In the open-ended question, asked respondents what values were most important in directing what to do with their lives. Participants cited happiness and personal enjoyment most frequently (81%), followed by helping others (78%), challenge, recognition, and achievement (76%), integrity, morality, or religious values (65%), and financial stability (61%). One student said that it's important to me to "do something that's good for myself, to feel helpful to others, and to feel confident in my ability to do so."  

Propositions about Giftedness

Participants were asked to respond to a variety of propositions that have been cited in the literature as most commonly influencing the concept of gifted women'signeity (Nisole, 1989). Eighteen responses (67%) had final validated evidence of the popular vs. intellectualism dilemma. The comments of two students are telling: (See Table 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposition</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women are more intelligent than men.</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men are more intelligent than women.</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men are more creative than women.</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are more creative than men.</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Propositions about Giftedness

- Women are more intelligent than men. (100%)
- Men are more creative than women. (100%)
- Women are more competitive than men. (100%)
- Men are more competitive than women. (0%)

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes and Goals</th>
<th>% of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Do you want to take advantage of more opportunities for education in the future? | 70% (90%)
| Would you like to have more money? | 63% (85%)
| How many important people do you feel you know personally? | 10% (15%)
| Men are more self-sufficient than women. | 70% (85%)
| Women are more self-sufficient than men. | 30% (15%)
| Do you anticipate having a family? | 10% (0%)
| Would you like to have children? | 100% (90%)
| How well do the following improve your self-esteem? | 10% (80%)
| Physical appearance | 90% (80%)
| Social acceptance | 10% (20%)
| Intellectual acceptance | 40% (60%)

Table 6
The Pros and Cons of Acceleration

The final open-ended question to which participants were asked to respond was what they considered to be the advantages and disadvantages of radical acceleration. The most commonly perceived advantage was the experience of being surrounded by intellectual peers for whom education was a high priority. As three respondents said:

EEE could respect making academically more my highest priority, I never find this would have been true in high school. The EEE was taken where there was a certain social stimulus. This a woman a lot more time to prepare themselves for the science and mathematics, and science before encountering those subjects in the university arena. And two had experienced the lack of life experience that they brought to the university.

One difficulty is a definite drawback. By 18-year-old senior, I feel I am a certain pressure and experience to be planning a career and preparing to go into the real world with all the 22-year-old students I can observe and be at times where there is a neat cut group where I fit in. I just like to sort out everything and feel that by growing up as fast as I can.

One other thing that has been hard on me is my lack of "life experience." Just the fact that I have not lived long enough. This is not something I can "pick up." I just have to live with it. This also forces me to think a lot more about others because I'm not sure of the kind of people I will be to other people. One young woman mentioned the unique drawback. You cannot say I've been programming computers for 4 years, whereas I am - you are to get a job. There isn't any point to get the impressive experience others might have when you skip several grades. Sure, I've been programming since I was 12, but among my potential employers I'm not sure it makes any difference.

Discussion

One question that has concerned many educators and parents is how one can learn-what radical acceleration is a wise option and what for whom is not. The data from this and previous studies (Cornell, Callahan, and Loyd, 1974; Noble, and Drummund, 1982; Noble, Robinson, and Gourley, 1968) indicate that individuals in the experimental program achieve the same level of performance as those in the control groups. This means that the data on the effectiveness of college programs for independent thinkers are determined and asserted, and which will have a strong effect on the development of future programs.
intensive preparation to succeed. Early qualms cannot be very dependent upon others by either speculation or analysis. As our respondents noted, it is a self-reinforcing cycle. Students must want to take this kind of challenge and continue to work hard, even when difficulties arise. Therefore, as the overall group of young women in this study found early college attendance to be both intellectually and socially stimulating, and gear extremely well as a result. Our data suggest that although gender was not a factor in most students' decisions to enroll at the EEP, women's college attendance is vital to maintain a number of important benefits from radical acceleration. Participants in this study developed more confidence in themselves and in their intellectual and social skills as a result of these efforts, and the enhanced perceptions of family and friends. The experience of being surrounded by talented, ambitious students, something few believed they would have had in high school, meant that they didn't have to lower their level of ambition in order to learn, or perform well that their capabilities allowed. Although their experiences are often for men, who accelerate (Robe & Drummond, 1997), we believe that as important for gifted young women because it exposes them to a rare combination of acceptance and encouragement at an early age, and might help them navigate their lives against less supportive environments as they grow older.

The most frequently used pattern by female early entrants involved dating men who, although traditional college age, were considerably older than they. As mentioned earlier, two respondents felt that they had been explicitly matched with boyfriend in terms of both sexual and life experiences. When dating involved an college rather than in high school, some unique opportunities can arise for some young women. One student commented, "Both of my parents had difficulty with the idea of my marrying, but I just know that I can do this with my confidence and support." The fate of some of these relationships may help to resolve these issues.

Finally, the effects of radical acceleration differ for young women than for young men. If high school were a more appealing environment, would high school separate, and higher education. In our study, we identified several of the concerns that were important. First, students have often foregrounded college high school opportunities? Although we cannot answer these questions definitively, they do indicate positive indications for future research.

Unfortunately, we have no data with which to understand this important issue. How might radical acceleration affect the lives of gifted young women who are either White or Hispanic? Again, we cannot say. Despite extensive and annual efforts to recruit appropriate students from all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, very few students of color apply to the Early Entrance Program. To date, the EEP has served only those students who were for African American or Hispanic descent. In this case, we must assume that the data we have correspond to our expectations that the EEP is a very small and close-knit program. Even though we understand concerns of confidentiality and anonymity by interviewing a randomly selected subset of students to our knowledge, we have a very low response rate that reflects the difficulty of recruiting gifted students to the program. Further, the EEP is a very small and close-knit program. Even though we understand concerns of confidentiality and anonymity by interviewing a randomly selected subset of students to our knowledge, we have a very low response rate that reflects the difficulty of recruiting gifted students to the program. Further, the EEP is a very small and close-knit program.
radically accelerate their education, regardless of how they were encountered on the way. All believed that their
environment had markedly improved their intellectual and academic skills, reinforced their self-confidence and professional goals, and strengthened their social and emotional well-being. Taken as a whole, the findings from this study and those cited earlier in this report clearly suggest that the most important question parents, educators, and champions of gifted females can ask is not "What are the negative effects of acceleration?" but rather "What are the consequences of not accelerating mature and self-disciplined gifted young women?"