The Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars at the University of Washington, Seattle, houses two early university entry programs and has been welcoming academically advanced young students since 1977. The two programs, the UW Academy for Young Scholars and the Transition School/Early Entrance Program collectively admit approximately 50 new students each year as freshmen at the UW. These freshmen range in age from 12 to 16 and all have left the relatively known (if academically unchallenging) world of middle or high school and entered the adult learning environment of the university.

From the fourth floor classroom windows the sounds of Drumheller fountain swooshing and splashing could be heard by a group of 12 early university entrance students as they sat around a conference table struggling to blow up balloons. It was an exceptionally warm October afternoon on the campus of the University of Washington (UW), and these students from the Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars (Robinson Center) were engaged in a workshop on stress reduction. The students were being instructed to describe their current sources of stress and to blow those stresses into the balloon. Then they were asked to identify any factors in their life (e.g. exercise, relationships, fun activities) that were helping to reduce their stress, thus lessening the burden and the size of their balloon. Sudden outbursts of laughter at attempts to get the balloons to inflate were followed by the distinct silence of shared understanding, empathy, and even surprise as students described struggles with academic as well as interpersonal and family issues.

This session was the first of six in a series called Resiliency Training, a pilot project designed to support early university entrants as they take on the socio-emotional challenges and adventures of their sophomore and junior year at the UW. As the Academic Counselor and Counseling Services Coordinator for the Robinson Center, watching these students engage with the balloons and stress reduction exercises, I was excited to see the potential of this new endeavor. Resiliency Training is the latest addition to the Robinson Center’s intrusive academic counseling model and related student support services.

**Intrusive Academic Counseling**

Intrusive academic counseling is a model that utilizes early intervention and relationship building as means of encouraging students to be actively engaged in their academic and social communities. Earl first introduced the intrusive model as a method of purposeful interventions aimed at increasing retention and student motivation (1998). The model’s interventions are counselor driven rather than student driven, and at the Robinson Center this means that students have required academic counseling meetings before classes begin, and twice more in their freshman year and once again in their sophomore year. At first read this may sound Draconian. However, the students in the UW Academy for Young Scholars (Academy) and the Transition School/Early
Entrance Program (TS/EEP) respond positively to these meetings and frequently request to meet more often. Part of the curriculum of this model involves a series of open ended questions designed to address the students’ academic and socio-emotional needs. For example, during the first term meetings for freshman, I inquire about the progress of courses and level of workload, as well as questions such as:

- Are you enjoying your experience so far?
- You recently dropped out of middle/high school to enroll in college early – was that a good decision?
- Do you feel this program is the right fit for you?
- How are your parents adjusting to having a full time college student?
- What types of non-academic activities are you becoming involved in or are you interested in becoming involved in?

### Identifying Basic Psychological Needs

These questions represent one of the methods that the Robinson Center utilizes to assess three fundamental psychological needs of adolescents: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Autonomy can be thought of as the need to feel empowered and to have an active role in one’s decisions or behaviors, competency as the need to feel effective and useful when engaging in activities, and relatedness as having a sense of belonging or feeling connected. These needs are drawn from Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 1985, 2000) and specifically LaGuardia and Ryan’s expansion of the theory to adolescents (2002), which holds that adolescent development in general and the development of intrinsic motivation in particular is supported and enhanced when these basic psychological needs are met. In our academic counseling and supportive services we are guided by the wisdom of Cross who eloquently reminds us that when we work with highly capable students we must remember that they are indeed children or adolescents first and their developmental and psychological needs are not superseded by their giftedness (Cross, 1997). By focusing on these three core components the Robinson Center has developed academic programming that supports the socio-emotional well-being of our students.

### Autonomy

When new Robinson Center students begin their transition into the University of Washington it is crucial that they perceive a sense of control over their own behavior. They are entering an adult learning environment that expects mature behaviors such as making independent decisions, seeking out help, and completing work with minimal guidance. University instructors will not remind students when homework is due or when exams are scheduled. Attendance is rarely taken in university courses and no one calls home when a student misses a class. Grades are not tracked online or even sent home at the end of the term, and if students do not understand the material, they must seek the instructor during office hours. These are new experiences and responsibilities that many college freshmen often struggle with, and that early entrants and their parents can find overwhelming.

### Supporting Student Autonomy

In an effort to prepare students and parents for this new environment and to clarify the new roles each of them will have, the Robinson Center staff intervenes early and often as students prepare to enter the University of Washington and throughout their first two years of study. As students are applying to the UW Academy for Young Scholars (for students currently in 10th grade) and for the Transition School/Early Entrance Program (for students under age 15), considerable efforts, including interviews with parents and students, and assessments by current teachers and counselors, are made to ensure that the choice to accelerate to university is the desire of the student and not only of the parent(s). This is a significant demonstration of student autonomy, or the sense that they have control over their own decisions, and it is crucial to student success in these programs.

Once students have been selected to enter university early, they meet individually and in small groups with the Academic Counselor and/or the Assistant Director of the Academy and EEP. These meetings are designed to introduce early entrants to the new responsibilities that will be placed on them and to the vast array of educational options now open to them. During these academic counseling meetings, students are asked to:

- Identify what they expect to get out of college in their first term, first year, and in their undergraduate career as a whole. (This question is asked of first and second year students.)
- Name courses that might lead them to a major interest and courses they want to take just for fun.
- Think about the experiences they would like to have and identify what would disappoint them if they were not able to do them.
- Practice and role play asking for help or assistance from a professor.
Strategic Programming, continued

- Consider the person(s) in their life that they could call upon when they are feeling stressed, worried, unsatisfied, upset, or challenged beyond their capacity.

- Prepare coping strategies for being academically challenged in a setting where they are no longer the smartest person in the classroom and to prepare for grades that are not all straight As.

These are a few of the activities that early entrants at UW are asked to engage in during their academic counseling meetings. Students are required to attend these meetings prior to entering the university, twice during their first year and once during their second year. Most students opt to visit more often and are always welcome to make appointments or to drop in with quick questions as needed.

Purposeful Parent Support

To parents reading this, a big question may be: Do parents attend these meetings with their students? The answer is yes, as we expect (and teach) our students to be full participants in the planning of their undergraduate careers and we treat them as traditional aged students, who would not bring a parent to an advising meeting. This is not to say that we do not involve parents. In fact, parents are crucial to the work that we do with early entrants and we partner with them through the academic year so they can best support their student. We at the Robinson Center believe that to support the academic and socio-emotional needs of our young scholars, we must collaborate with parents and assist them with this radical transition as well.

We invite all parents of new students to celebratory events marking the transition out of middle/high school and into university as well as a new parent orientation that goes beyond the transitional parent orientation that the UW offers to parents of all freshmen. The celebratory events are similar to a graduation ceremony and provide a public and symbolic end to middle/high school and a launching off of a new educational adventure. The parent orientation allows us to share with parents the experiences of parents who have already taken this path, outline our expectations of them and what they may expect of the Robinson Center staff, as well as provide an opportunity for parents to form a support community. During the first year we host two parent check-in events (one in the first term and one in the second) so parents can reconnect with us and each other and we can address issues that are impending (mid-term and final exams, students’ quest for independence, first term grades) and academic opportunities (research, study abroad) as well as answer questions in an open and relaxed forum. By continuing to help our parents understand what is expected of their young university student we feel the students’ needs for autonomy will also be nurtured and supported.

Competency

The two early entry programs at the Robinson Center were established under the guiding principle of providing highly capable students with an educational environment that has provided an “optimal match” for individual students. This match is optimized by providing a level of intellectual engagement that presents consistent challenges to keep students motivated, avoids the boredom associated with being under-challenged, and the anxiety that overwhelming challenges can create. The idea of providing an optimal match is similar to the second psychological need that is necessary for the development of adolescents’ intrinsic motivation and competency. Competency is defined as “the need to feel effective in one’s actions and capable of meeting the challenges of everyday life” (LaGuardia and Ryan, 2002, p. 195). Ryan described this need as an ongoing process that, unlike hunger, never reaches satiety. Rather, it continues to seek a sense of usefulness.

Allowing students to find their optimal match

The hunger imagery is very effective at depicting how competency functions. If your children were hungry, you would not insist that they eat only one type of food or always eat the same type of food you enjoy. Encourage your children to try a variety of foods so they may enjoy good nutrition and do not miss out on any culinary delights. In the same way, we encourage parents not to insist that their children take only one type of course or a prescribed set of courses. Just as the food pyramid defines the items that make a healthy and balanced diet (many vegetable, fruits, whole grains) the liberal arts undergraduate core requires a variety of courses for a balanced degree (some humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and quantitative reasoning). Allowing early entrants to make decisions on what courses they should take supports their autonomy and ownership of their decisions. When our students own the decision of which courses to enroll in, it is my experience that they are more likely to take responsibility for the course outcomes, whereas when the course is mandated by a parent and the student struggles, they are not as likely to take responsibility for their performance or to do as well. In addition, by providing a support structure to help students explore interests and collect evidence that supports their decisions, competency is nurtured as well.

Understanding Our Gifted, Spring 2011
Strategic Programming, continued

Strategic Programming Within the Classroom

The Robinson Center aims to further nurture student competency by offering a research seminar in the second term of students’ first year at UW. The purpose of this course is to teach students how to make purposeful plans, to explore all academic and social interests they have, to learn more about themselves in the context of others, to take good risks, and to craft an undergraduate experience that best suits their goals and values. This seminar is optional for all first year students (to support autonomy), but parents are given a course syllabus just prior to registration and asked to talk to their student about taking the course, and first year students are encouraged to talk to students who have completed the course. Typically 85-90 percent of our first year early entrants take the course and of those, 90 percent recommend it to future students. Students in the course will practice writing personal statements as well as resumes and cover letters, take the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Strong Interest Inventory and have their results interpreted by staff from the UW Counseling Center. They will determine what their major should be, investigate this major and file a report of their findings, and finally create a term-by-term course plan that outlines which courses they will take when. The students are guided through reflections on their long-term plans and encouraged to take good risks with their academic planning. An example of feedback encouraging good risk taking may include: encouragement to consider an experiential learning opportunity (study abroad, research, service learning), taking a term off for an internship, or to explore a double major in disparate disciplines. These plans are kept in the students’ academic files and are reviewed during subsequent academic counseling appointments. In addition to the structure of those appointments, this seminar provides a context to support student competency needs in a comfortable social environment of their peers in the Academy and EEP.

Relatedness

The third basic need, according to LaGuardia and Ryan, focuses on students’ ability to engage with, be accepted by, and feel a part of their community. The impact of the university environment on the social development of early entrants cannot be overlooked when considering the socio-emotional needs of our students. The intimate community of the Robinson Center and the larger opportunities of the university offer tremendous advantages to these intellectually curious scholars, yet at the same time present significant challenges for adolescents.

An Urgent Need to Belong

Adolescence is a developmental period that can be consumed with an urgent need to belong, fit in or be accepted. As parents and professionals know, this sense can be exacerbated for highly capable students who struggle to find both intellectual as well as social peers. Cross’s (1997) description of the challenges that highly capable students face when trying to negotiate the misaligned intellectual development between themselves and their same aged peers in traditional school settings. These situations can impact students’ feelings of belonging and can result in poor coping skills (e.g. “dumbing” themselves down, lying about their academic achievements to peers, or refusal to participate in the classroom) in order to try to fit in. Early entrants, while finding same aged intellectual peers within the Academy and EEP, face a variety of challenges while working to fit into the adult world of the university community. The Robinson Center works to assist our students in this endeavor.

Community building within the Robinson Center begins early, as new Transition School and Academy students participate in overnight camping trips designed to foster a safe and welcoming environment and encourage new students to get to know one another. Our students have at times experienced being the smartest person in the classroom and are now making the transition from being a big fish in a small pond to being a relatively small fish in a much bigger pond. The anxiety is palpable on the days that incoming students meet their new peers for the first time, and this is why the Robinson Center’s staff arranges for the first group meetings to be of a social rather than academic nature. The Transition School students hike together, climbing up rough terrain to obtain the gorgeous vistas at Camp Casey; the Academy students don matching camp t-shirts and take the plunge on the rope swing that gives panoramic views of the Puget Sound at Camp Indiana. As the students pack up the vans and buses to head out on these adventures they are wary strangers, but a mere 40 hours later observers would assume these students have known each other for years.

Informal Strategy

This social support structuring continues as the new school year begins and new students get to know their older peers at the Robinson Center as they hang out in the RC Lounge and bake delicious treats in the Center’s kitchen. The Robinson Center is known to throw the best Halloween parties (with the best costumes) on campus, and when March 14 (Pi day) rolls around, students bake splendid and complex pies. The community of the Robinson Center is the starting point for many students as they look for and create their new academic
and social groups. For some this is a launching off point for further integration into the university community such as research groups, associations with campus departments and majors, student leadership opportunities and foreign study. For others, especially first year students, it is a safe and welcoming home base that provides the necessary structure to support academic work in a more rigorous realm. As most of our students are commuters, the Robinson Center serves as a gathering place and social hub as well as the location of academic counselors and other Center staff.

With the Robinson Center’s staff in such close proximity to the students we can engage both formally and informally with students throughout the day. This leads to dynamic interactions as the staff, while observing how early entrants are adapting to the new environment, develop relationships with the students and can intervene when they are struggling. Radical changes in a student’s behavior or appearance can alert staff to a potential problem the student is having and allow us to intervene quickly. Since students are constantly meeting with and talking with staff members, this intervention can be done without drawing too much attention to the student. Another benefit of the intimate and relaxed ethos of the Robinson Center is that as the relationships develop between staff and students, students become more willing to seek out both academic and non-academic advice. This informal structure is actually a purposeful teaching tool that allows the staff to encourage students in the task of asking for help, a crucial skill for developing scholars. By working to provide a safe, welcoming, and supporting environment for early entrants to launch their academic careers, the Robinson Center staff strives to help our students feel that they belong.

Staying Resilient

Back in the classroom that held Robinson Center sophomores, juniors, and some difficult balloons, students will meet for the last session of Resiliency Training. Over the past six weeks these sophomore and junior early entrants have worked on stress reduction skills, examined their own values and how those values impact the decisions they make, and have taken a closer, more reflective look at how they perceive themselves in this academic setting. They have been guided through this process by professionals from the university’s Counseling Center as well as their fellow peers who have volunteered for this seminar. As this is a pilot project, we will be debriefing the students about this experience, asking them if the program was helpful, and inquiring about what can be added or changed to best fit their needs.

Evaluations and augmentations are essential to all of the support systems the Robinson Center has in place. As our intrusive academic counseling model and our outreach to parents work to support autonomy; as we assist individual students to find an optimal match in their undergraduate career in support of their competency, and as the hikes up the mountain side, rope swing adventures over Puget Sound and gryvere encrusted pear pie nurture a sense of belonging and relatedness, we continue to work closely with our students. This allows us to determine the best ways to meet their socio-emotional needs. By doing so we hope to nurture their autonomy, competency, and relatedness so they may thrive, excel, and thoroughly enjoy their undergraduate careers.

For more information on the Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars please visit: http://depts.washington.edu/cscy/

References


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