

# Early Entrance to College: Students' Stories

Paula Olszewski-Kubilius

## UW EEPER'S STORIES

Jenny Shafer (pp. 235-239)

Dan Shiovitz (pp. 239-241)

Arturo Zamora (pp. 244-247)

**E**arly entrance to college has long been a strategy for academically gifted students to obtain appropriately challenging coursework. With identification mechanisms such as talent search programs in existence for almost 20 years, a flowering of university-based summer programs offering accelerated coursework over the past decade, and new early college entrance programs emerging each year, more and more academically talented students are prepared for and taking advantage of this option. Research studies attest to the academic success and positive social adjustment of early college entrants (Olszewski-Kubilius, 1995), as do the personal stories of gifted adolescents who chose to go to college.

The essays that follow describe the fears, anxieties, hopes, problems, and triumphs of 11 students who chose to go to college early. They went to different programs and came from different states and backgrounds, yet their stories are remarkably similar. In most cases, these students chose to go to college early because their high schools offered little for them. In some cases, their high schools simply did not have advanced courses, and in others, the schools were unwilling to accommodate their need for an accelerated pace of learning. Other students longed for the intellectual challenge of college, particularly the exposure to other disciplines, such as psychology and linguistics, that are not included in the typical high school curriculum.

The decisions of these students to enter early were highly personal. They consulted with parents and dealt with the objections of friends and teachers. Primarily, however, they listened to their own inner voices that spoke to them about their love of learning and challenge, and their need for an intellectual community at a particular point in their lives.

These students defy the stereotypes of very bright children. They are sociable, initially finding camaraderie among other

early entrance students, and later with typically aged college students. In fact, many of the students are probably highly socially skilled, effectively managing the social environment and culture of a university at age 14 or 16. Some students became very involved in campus activities. They are all clearly risk takers, opting to venture forth into worlds unknown—the world of adults—in an effort to be true to themselves and who they are, and to develop their intellect and talent.

Many students encountered active resistance from friends and peers who did not understand their unconventional paths. But, what is especially discouraging was the lack of support from some teachers and counselors. Carwill James expressed this best when he wrote, "Sadly, the first step of that [early college entrance] is often a trail of fiery accusations about one's competence to attend college—a trial which almost no senior, no matter how immature, has to endure." Students who choose early entrance encounter one of the basic assumptions of our current structure of schooling—that chronological age is the best determiner of readiness for the next level of education and grouping as opposed to degree of mastery or level of maturity or motivation. A major contribution of research that demonstrates the success of gifted students in accelerated classes is to challenge this myth.

As a result of the attitudes of school personnel, the conduit to early entrance programs often came from outside the walls of the student's schools. Students often received mailings from the early entrance colleges and universities because they had been part of a talent search program or participated in a university summer program. While this testifies to the advantages of talent search programs for adolescents, it also bears noting that schools themselves do not appear aware of nor eager to look for truly innovative ways to address the educational and

social needs of highly gifted children. This ignorance, coupled with disapproving attitudes towards early entrance, means that very bright adolescents and their families will have to rely primarily on outside agencies for resources, information, and support.

The college years of the early entrance students were not always smooth sailing. Like typically aged college students, they experienced some academic failures initially, primarily due to immaturity and a lack of well developed study skills. The students were intellectually able to handle college level studies, but had not experienced challenging courses that required concerted effort. Study skills sometimes had to be acquired quickly. Nevertheless, overall achievement was high and the experience was perceived as positive. Few students, if any, had any regrets. Most cited the advantages of being in the right kind of intellectual and emotionally supportive environment at that time of their lives and of gaining years of time to pursue other interests. One student, Romesh, expressed that an advantage of early entrance for him was that it allowed him to finish with the world of school and enter the world of work (in the field of computers), which he finds interesting and challenging. Another student, Arturo, wrote the following about going early to college: "No loss of social activity, just the adoption of academic responsibility." Unlike what others told them about skipping all or part of high school, these early entrance students did not feel like they had missed the best years of their life.

Critics of acceleration are often quick to point out the academic failures and social problems experienced by accelerants as evidence that the practice is harmful, or at the very least, disadvantageous for students. Supporters assert that, as with other accelerative options, early entrance is not for every bright student. Also, it is not known if students with academic or social adjustment difficulties may have experienced these anyway, even if they had been older when they started college. Research does not address this issue, but it is likely they would have. Even for those students for whom early college entrance is appropriate, educators and parents should not expect perfect academic records or social adjustment while in college. That would be unrealistic for any group of students and contrary to expectations for this period of development, which is characterized by identity search-

ing and a great deal of emotional and social growth. Dan Shiovitz reminds us of this when he wrote: "Remember there are different kinds of gifted kids. People who are good at one thing are not always good at everything else and shouldn't be expected to be."

The statements of these early entrants cause us to reflect upon the educational environment of most high schools. Many of the early entrance students found these environments grossly lacking what they needed, and some found them inimical. They moved at too slow a pace, course offerings were limited, and attempts to alter the program to suit their needs were actively discouraged. Overwhelmingly, the primary motivation to go to college early was to find a community of support, acceptance, and intellectual challenge. Megan Lindsay described her frustration at not being able to discuss some philosophical issues engendered by the play *Julius Caesar* in her high school class, and then finally being able to engage in that discussion during her freshman seminar at Simon's Rock. Dean Olsher described the difference between high school and college best when he wrote: "High school was the flat, black and white landscape of Dorothy Gales' Kansas. Simon's Rock was the Land of Oz, in color." What college provided, which high school could not, was a feeling of acceptance from a scholarly community that nurtured students' intellect, that included teachers who interacted with them on important intellectual issues, and an intellectual peer group.

The student essays here were gathered together to help other academically talented students see that early entrance to college may be an option for them, to alleviate parents' fears about social adjustment, emotional well-being, and academic achievement, and to help educators realize that there are children in their classrooms who need the benefits of these kinds of programs. As Megan expressed, "academic acceleration isn't only for a select group of prodigies, but for anyone who feels less challenged than he or she could be."

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## The Students' Stories

### Carwill James

*Carwill James completed a master's degree in public policy with a concentration in environmental and human rights policy at the University of Chicago in June 1998. His undergraduate degree was in mathematics and physics from Northwestern University. While at Northwestern, he was the 1996 Lincoln Laureate, an award given for academic achievement and leadership, and was active in theater productions. He has served as a residential counselor in the Center for Talent Development's summer programs for four years. He plans to seek employment working for a non-governmental organization either coordinating grassroots campaigns or analyzing policy on the environment, human rights, or both.*

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In November 1991, I broke the news to my high school principal that I was applying to college, even though I was a junior and had skipped 10th grade. I had been advised, especially by my teacher at an academic camp, that high school was no longer a valuable contribution to my academic life, and college was a viable alternative. If he hadn't said that, I might never have

considered the possibility. But, after a lot of thought, I agreed with him.

I visited Northwestern University, the home of the camp (Center for Talent Development summer programs) and what was to become my college. I met students, saw student life, looked at course offerings, and asked many questions. Nothing there altered my basic conviction that this was a step I was ready for.

But, when my principal heard my plans, he insisted that I wasn't ready. In his opinion, college required a level of social maturity that was beyond my chronological age. There would be a gulf that separated me from my peers. Finally, the independence required of college students was a serious challenge, even for 18-year-old high school graduates.

I'm not writing this essay to rebut those claims, although I now have the experience and the per-

spective to do so quite thoroughly. What I do want to offer is a window on the experience of attending college early. Sadly, the first step of that is often a trial of fiery accusations about one's incompetence to attend college—a trial which almost no senior, no matter how immature, has to endure.

College life begins with scores of freshmen in a dorm, with differing personalities, backgrounds, and viewpoints. Assignment is random, and the first friendships form based on who is assigned near whom. That puts some pretty unusual combinations together, but many of them stick. I found myself among people I liked and respected, and among people I couldn't truly respect. I altered the places and people with whom I spent my time accordingly. As a result, I found meaningful, enduring bonds with new friends. Naturally, most of these people were at least two older than I was.

My friendships were no different than those of other college students. They were, however, strengthened by their setting. Being at a university means living amongst your fellow students. It means having a social network of the people you know surrounding you. And, it means having the events of an incredible community as a backdrop to your life. Relationships form and grow out of the many ways college students work and interact together.

Most colleges include a large, multifaceted community. My university has service, cultural, artistic, religious, political, social, and administrative organizations that have lasted for decades, spanning generations of undergraduates. Students participate in them to understand themselves, to change their world, to have fun, and to do what is right or just what they most need to do. I became heavily involved in theater, in Model United Nations, and in political organizing for peace, human rights, and the environment. By participating, I changed my perspective and my expectations for myself and my future. I was also exposed to countless other people, many of whom remain very important to me.

Academically, my teacher and the others who had advised me were right. College courses offered a better pace and level of difficulty than did high school classes. That isn't to say that there weren't many slow-paced and unchallenging courses. However, unless coerced by the requirements of my major, I always had the option of seeking bet-

ter classes. More importantly, I could spend my time exploring ideas that go far beyond the narrow confines of the high school curriculum. High schools rarely offer certain disciplines like sociology, linguistics, and psychology (to name a few), and narrowly focused classes on subjects like European witchcraft or ecopopulism are impossible for them.

It is the sum of our roles in our complex community, our social attributes, and academic interests that define college students for each other. Age is not an important part of that equation. Those who would let their age keep them back from full participation outside of academics, however, should be warned. The benefits of college for them will be tragically incomplete.

To experience the undisputed advantages of college education and of college experience earlier than normal is an incredible opportunity. It is immediately enriching and it opens doors to new areas of knowledge and personal growth that remain open for the rest of one's life. The decision to follow this path is a significant choice that should not be based on academics alone, but neither should it be hindered by prejudices about chronological age.

#### Megan Lindsay Case

*Megan Lindsay Case began her first year at Simon's Rock College of Bard at age 16. She received a bachelor's degree in arts and aesthetics with a concentration in music, magna cum laude, in 1996. She attended graduate school at the University of Chicago, earning a master of arts in social science in 1997. Currently she works for the North American Students of Cooperation (NASCO), a non-profit organization providing assistance to campus cooperatives across the U.S. and Canada.*

Tenth-grade honors English—the class held promise for reading great books and having exciting discussions. Instead, each chapter we read was accompanied by a list of questions, which we would answer row by row, in turn, every morning. An answer that deviated from the expected meant points deducted from a student's grade. One morning, as we were reading *Julius Caesar*, a few of us got excited about a disagreement over the answer to a question—one of fate vs. free will. We tried to begin a discussion, which was quickly squelched by the teacher. "We need to finish the list of questions today. We don't have time for this."

The unfortunate situation in many high schools is that teachers are forced to teach only the basic requirements for standardized tests. My high school curriculum had kept me interested at the beginning of high school, but by the middle of 10th grade, all that remained was to finish off my sequences in math, science, English, and social studies. Still, I hadn't considered any alternatives. A friend had attempted to structure his high school program to graduate two years early, and the resistance he got from teachers, administrators, and students made the process impossible. I was determined to make the most of my high school experience, so I threw myself into extracurricular activities to make up for what was lacking in the classroom. This seemed to make sense. People interested in academics, after all, were abnormal, and my friends and I conceitedly enjoyed our position as the minority in high school culture.

One morning, my English teacher held up a pamphlet she had received from a small college of which I had never heard. The program was aimed at students who wanted to begin college after 10th grade. She asked if anyone was interested. Although the class was full of the more ambitious 10th-graders in my high school, I was the only one to raise my hand. Expressing an interest in something so out of the ordinary elicited grumbling and angry glares from my classmates.

As I went through the early-college application process, my teachers told me I would be missing the best years of my life, that there were important things to be learned in high school, and that it was impossible for someone my age to survive in a college environment. Everyone seemed to believe that all 16-year-olds were exactly the same in their intellectual development. The idea that some students have a greater interest in physics than football and are ready to pursue college work at age 15 or 16, rather than 18 or 19 is a foreign concept to some educators.

Upon visiting Simon's Rock College, I learned that the reaction of my classmates and teachers

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was far from unusual. I fell in love with the wooded, rural campus on sight, and when the dean of the college began speaking about the reasons why students come to Simon's Rock—in part because the culture of high school discourages anything out of the ordinary, including intellectual and academic excellence—I was convinced.

I was to find that I wasn't "abnormal" at Simon's Rock, and I also learned that I wasn't particularly extraordinary either. Surrounded by 300 other students who had experiences similar to

mine, I began to learn humility. I learned that academic achievement does not have to mean beating out one's classmates on an exam. The hollow competition that I so relished in Science Olympiad meets, Russian essay contests, and orchestra auditions was gradually replaced with a genuine, honest interest in the work that my peers and I were doing. No longer did I have to seek intellectual excitement outside the classroom—there was too much going on inside.

I found that I was taken seriously at Simon's Rock. The faculty were nurturing without being condescending. The us-against-them attitude characterizing faculty/student relations in my high school was replaced by genuine friendships with accom-

plished writers, musicians, and mathematicians. These friendships have been some of the most powerful influences on my intellectual, as well as personal, development.

Instead of simply going through the motions to finish high school, I spent four years in an intense, exciting intellectual environment. This fall, I begin graduate school. Although I will likely be one of the younger students in the program, I know I will be well-served by the skills I've learned at Simon's Rock: to take the lead in class discussion, to take every opportunity to interact with the faculty, and above all, to demand respect for my ideas regardless of my age.

I already know that the latter is the biggest challenge of all. One of the difficulties of being an early college student is that, while I've grown accustomed to being taken seriously within the

academic community, I sometimes find that outside the community, my youth is problematic. I get frustrated when assumptions are made based solely upon how old I appear. However, it's a trade-off I have to accept for the wonderful experience that I've had, at least until my age equals that of the average college graduate.

About a year after my 10th-grade *Julius Ceasar* debate was cut off, I was sitting in an English class of a different sort. It was my second semester at Simon's Rock, and I was taking the required freshman seminar. We were reading *The Oedipus Cycle*, sitting around a large table, and being led in discussion by a faculty member. At one point, he turned around and wrote on the left side of the blackboard "fate." On the right, he wrote "free will." We then launched into a debate about the contradiction in the belief of the ancient Greeks that Oedipus had an uncontrollable fate, but at the same time was responsible for his actions. This was the discussion I had tried to begin a year earlier! The reason I had come to Simon's Rock had been exemplified perfectly.

I believe it's a good idea for everyone in their early years of high school to consider whether it would be advantageous to start college earlier than expected. Academic acceleration isn't only for a select group of prodigies, but for anyone who feels less challenged than he or she could be. There are many students who would certainly benefit from this concept, but have never been seriously introduced to it. Four years after having begun college early, I know that opting to come to Simon's Rock was the best decision I could have made.

#### Dean Olsher

*Dean Olsher is the cultural correspondent for National Public Radio in Washington, DC. Highlights from recent years include ongoing coverage of controversial exhibitions at public institutions in Washington (the Smithsonian, Library of Congress), and an occasional series of reports on issues in jazz. But, according to Dean, "In spite of my extensive musical training, I play the accordion."*

My heart stopped momentarily when my father pulled something from the waste basket in my bedroom and asked, "What's this?" It was a natural reaction for a high school sophomore; my mind raced through the inventory of things I did not want him to see. I was relieved to find out it was a small brochure for some school far away. I had

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barely glanced at it because it did not fit into my plan, which was to graduate from high school after three years and then go on to college. It was a classic case of not seeing the forest for the trees. Thanks to my father's snooping eye, he saw the opportunity to move that timetable up a whole year.

Simon's Rock found out about me because I had taken the PSAT early to get out of an unimpressive regional high school in rural New Jersey. My parents knew long before I did that something was wrong when they saw me earning high grades for sub-standard work. "But he's one of my best students," explained my English teacher. "I'm teaching the rest of the freshmen how to use commas!"

High school was the flat, black-and-white landscape of Dorothy Gale's Kansas. Simon's Rock was the wonderful land of Oz, in color. Instead of being ashamed of my curiosity about what was going on over the rainbow, I could wear that curiosity proudly and openly. I left a culture that promoted ignorance and traded it for a culture that promoted learning.

It took a whole four days to feel that I fit in, despite feeling a little scared at first by all the experimentation going on around me. Needless to say, with accelerated learning came what you might call "advanced social behaviors": the late 1970s at Simon's Rock were much like the late 1960s everywhere else, although I hear that is no longer the case. I rebelled against the social norms of the time (a proud Simon's Rock tradition) by sticking to the more conventional ways of expanding my mind. I was accepted as a peer, albeit a slightly square one.

Besides, I had more important things to do, like falling in love: with girls, great literature, string quartets, the Berkshire landscape, and with the physical thrill that happens when solving mental puzzles. I became attached to the community of students and teachers and maintenance workers and librarians who met every day in the cafeteria to continue classroom discussions and just to check in with each other, to make sure everyone was doing okay. I became committed to the belief that there is always a more interesting, deeper meaning to things if you look and listen carefully.

I realized soon after I arrived that Simon's Rock unalterably changed the course of my life. Although I had known since the age of 12 that I wanted a career in radio, my narrow horizons in

high school allowed me to imagine a future whose pinnacle might be a job as a rock-and-roll D.J. in Manhattan. Not long into college, I figured out such a life would simply not do. The need for constant challenge that I acquired at Simon's Rock has stayed with me and propelled me to the point where I get to satisfy my curiosity every day at National Public Radio, where I report on culture and the arts. If it were not for this kind of work and the chance to keep learning about the world, I cannot imagine what I would do to fulfill the promise held out by my experience at Simon's Rock, where the unspoken motto was: challenge intellectual authority; think independently. Such things were certainly not tolerated at the university where I began and prematurely ended my graduate studies.

Sometimes, it is downright difficult to create a life that is true to the things I learned at Simon's Rock: always to expect more, never to feel satisfied with what you are handed. But it sure beats being a D.J.

#### Romesh Prakashpalan

Romesh is currently employed for Eleris, Inc., where he heads up Realtime Graphics R & D. Some of his projects include "Virtual Pool" for the Sony Playstation and an upcoming 3-D first-person shooter with the working title of "Envy the Dead".

Actually, I didn't find out about the early entrance program at California State University, Los Angeles. It found me. When I was in sixth grade, I had to take the CTBS (California Test of Basic Skills) as do all of the students. Since I had a 99 percentile in math and English, I was invited to take the SAT when I was in seventh grade. I scored rather well, and they invited me to take a few courses for a summer semester at the university. Since I did well in my classes and seemed to be adjusting to college life, they told me it would be fine if I started full-time. I talked it over with my parents, and while they had concerns about me entering in college at such an early age, they were very supportive of my decision.

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I was always bored during school, daydreaming about some new computer programming topic or computer-related material. That's probably the main reason I decided college was right for me. I could talk to my classmates at their level (and occasionally beyond), vs. the traditional junior high school kid who is only interested in going to movies and listening to loud music. (Well, perhaps it only seems that way.)

The program was great. There was a room that we early entrants had to ourselves where we could

discuss topics or just goof off. We had a counselor who would oversee the group by making sure we were not having a hard time with our courses and we were adjusting well, both socially and mentally. Fortunately, for most of us, adjusting was rather easy, and other than the occasional stares we got from people passing us by, college was fun. (Especially when you could tell people that you were really 20, but smoking had stunted your growth. It was kind of neat messing with their minds.) There were courses that many of us found either boring, dull, or difficult. Some classes, like Calculus, no one liked, but we managed to always pull through the courses no matter what they were like. I have many friends that are of typical college

age, and in fact they outnumber the number of friends I have that are my age. By the time most of us were juniors and seniors, we looked old enough to be mistaken for really young-looking college freshmen. When I was in my third year, people didn't notice me as much, and it became easier to "fit in" with the rest of the college students. I didn't become involved with any campus organizations and didn't get a chance to participate in any campus activities, but I know a few other early entrance students who did.

If I had the chance to enter into college early again, I would definitely do it. It is more than worth the amount of effort I put in. I find it refreshing to know that I will never have to step foot inside a classroom for as long as I live, and I can get on with the "real world" which is infinitely more interesting and exciting than most

of the work that you do in school. If I knew a friend who seemed mature enough and capable of tackling a major challenge, I would recommend early college entrance. It is one of the most worthwhile things to do with your time. Think about what you would be doing otherwise. You would probably be bored, wasting your time watching television or playing video games, watching movies, and talking to friends on the phone. Think, however, if you managed to utilize that time in a worthwhile manner: finish up college, get a start on your career about four years earlier than the typical person, or finish up an advanced degree and still be ahead of the people you left behind in high school. Then, you would have all the time in the world to catch up on your social life, while others are out looking for jobs and worrying about what to do about the rent. In this way, it seems to me that getting into college early outweighs any of its disadvantages. Plus, it doesn't mean that I didn't have any fun! I got to talk with good friends every day between classes (sometimes a break of four hours), play computer games, surf the Internet, and so forth. Now, I'm a computer game developer, and I plan to form my own company sometime in the future. Life doesn't get much better than this.

#### Jill Rasmussen

*Jill Rasmussen graduated from the Program for the Exceptional Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College in May 1996. Since then she has spent two summers working as an adventure counselor. She also worked in the residential life component of the PEG program during an academic year, and traveled extensively across the U.S. Her interest in outdoor education continues. She currently resides in Colorado, where she serves as a professional tour guide for an outdoor adventure travel company.*

When I came to the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) at Mary Baldwin College in the fall of 1992, I was an excited and somewhat nervous 14-year-old. Although I had a few impressions about what college would be like, I had no idea about the changes that would occur in my life in the next four years, or the direction my life would take after commencement. All I knew was that I was tremendously excited about beginning my life, being challenged, learning new things, and meeting new people.

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Many people have questioned my decision to start college four years early. I come from a small community in West Virginia. Friends and relatives experienced a real struggle to accept the admittedly non-traditional route I chose for my education. When it came right down to it, it was my own decision, which I made with the support and love of my immediate family. We are an extremely close-knit family of four. My younger brother was 10 when I left for school. One of the most difficult parts of missing home has been missing his growing up. We are fortunate, though, because my leaving brought us closer together. The way my parents approached the situation was incredible. They would never hold me back; they have always allowed me every opportunity they could. When we determined that PEG was a positive and workable step for me, they never backed down from the decision or discouraged me. Instead, they were my constant source of support as I entered four years of transitions and changes.

My high school included 7th through 12th grades, with approximately 100 students in each grade. In the eighth grade, I began constructing my four-year plan. There was no formal instruction for gifted high school students in our school; evidently, one stops being gifted after the eighth grade. Without any honors or Advanced Placement classes, my prospects for any sort of challenge looked bleak. Fighting the system was a battle designed to hurt our entire family, as both of my parents worked for the county school system as teachers. We began to research other options. In the beginning of the eighth grade, my gifted teacher told me about a school that let girls enter college one to four years early. After almost a year of deliberation and an extensive application process, I was accepted in the eighth entering class of the PEG program at Mary Baldwin College.

I was in the best place I could have been at that stage in my life. All of a sudden, I had friends who could relate to me on several levels. I could engage in deep discussions with them, and I could have fun with them. I wasn't looked up to or down upon for succeeding because it was what was expected of us. At the same time, I had a large support network of peers and staff who made PEG and the college experience a comfortable environment in which to grow and make mistakes. In addition to all the fears of a traditional-aged freshman, I was experiencing the typical adolescent troubles of growing up. My

family and I both felt that PEG catered to my needs beautifully. The program is sensitive to the needs of gifted females, and its structure is designed to help students along their individual growth processes.

One aspect of the program that was especially helpful was the residence life environment. There is 24-hour coverage of the dorm for the younger students. We were each assigned a residence life staff member who was our academic and emotional advisor. As we progressed through the program, there was a transitional experience that entailed fewer rules and more independence. By the time we were juniors or seniors, we were able to live independently on campus without supervision. Students are expected to reach a certain level of maturity and independence before they are able to take care of themselves. Because it is integral to the very structure of the program, we were always encouraged to find our own solutions to problems. This emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency taught me valuable lessons and prepared me for life after college.

Mary Baldwin is an all-women's college. The fact that there were no college-age males running around campus on a daily basis definitely made the idea of sending me away easier for my parents. Academically, I believe I gained a lot more confidence from an all-female learning environment. Women are in leadership positions in the college; the director of the program, the dean of students, and the president of the college are all women. Role models are in abundance on a women's college campus, and as a gifted teenager that was very important for me. The program did offer social activities like organized dances with local boys' schools, for those students who enjoyed that sort of interaction.

Mary Baldwin is a liberal arts school. A liberal arts education, more than teaching me facts, gave me the tools I feel are necessary for graduate school and any sort of job thereafter. I started out as a biology major, but like any freshman, I switched majors enough times to have tried just about every major they offer at Mary Baldwin.

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Finally, at the end of my sophomore year, I decided to major in German. At the time, Mary Baldwin did not offer a German major, so I developed one as an independent major with the help of my advisor. I was grateful for this benefit of a small, liberal arts institution. My curriculum included some classes at Washington and Lee University, as well as extensive study abroad. My trips to Germany for parts of my sophomore, junior, and senior years played an invaluable role in my education and making me into the person I am today.

I graduated from Mary Baldwin *magna cum laude* with an honors degree, distinction in my major, and Phi Beta Kappa. I am currently working as a residence life coordinator with the program. My other interests include outdoor education, and over the summer I worked as an adventure camp counselor. My goals for the future include traveling, working abroad, and attending graduate school. The Program for the Exceptionally Gifted has helped me develop the skills and confidence I need to make my dreams come true, as well as the courage to keep dreaming. It has been a wonderful journey so far, and I have never regretted the decision I made five years ago.

**Jodi Sangster**

*Jodi is currently at Cornell University completing a bachelor's degree in microbiology. He is an active member in a marching band and plays hockey for a local team.*

When I first heard about the Texas Academy of Math and Science (TAMS), I was in eighth grade. I had already taken all of the math classes offered by my middle school, so I went to high school in the morning to take geometry. I had also finished the English classes and science classes offered, so I had a lot of electives in my schedule that year. The idea of going to college two years early intrigued me. I had had enough of sitting bored in classes that were taught to the slowest kids. I had already taken a year off from school between the seventh and eighth grades so that I would be closer to kids of my own age.

In high school, my situation changed. I went to a private school in Houston. The school was academically wonderful—the classes were stimulating and advanced. However, I didn't fit in with the other students at the school. Most of them were extremely wealthy, and they seemed to me to have a rather narrow view of life. In fact, they seemed extremely shallow to me, and I made no close friends. I went to a preview day at TAMS and was impressed with what I saw. The people there seemed open, friendly, and genuinely interested in learning. I applied to TAMS during my sophomore year and was accepted.

Academically, TAMS gives students opportunities they never would have received had they stayed in high school. Research opportunities are rampant. Last semester, I took 21 hours of college courses, including classes in genetics, organic chemistry, self-defense, and psychology. I plan to be a veterinarian, and I've been able to load my schedule with the sciences courses I love. TAMS has a set of required courses one must take to graduate. Once I fulfill those requirements, I can take any course I want as an elective. The University of North Texas offers literally thousands of courses, so there's bound to be something in which you're interested. The TAMS requirements (math through calculus II, introductory biology, chemistry, physics, and several humanities courses) are reasonable. These courses give you a strong all-around background and shore up the gaps left from leaving high school early.

Socially, TAMS also provides new opportunities. Everyone at TAMS has a roommate, and all of us live in the same dorm, which creates a wonderful atmosphere. Here at TAMS, I've made the best friends that I've ever had. I live with these people 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Obviously, this situation can sometimes create tensions, but it also leads to strong friendships. TAMS resembles a boarding school, but at half the cost. Students pay for room and board; the state pays for tuition, books, and fees. TAMS has rules and dorm staff for our safety and for support—but they have never hindered anything I wanted to accomplish. All TAMS students go home or to a friend's house for one weekend every month when the dorm closes.

TAMS is certainly not a typical high school. Last year, a few students made a move to get us a mascot and official school colors separate from those of the University of North Texas. This move

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*The Program for the  
Exceptionally Gifted has  
helped me develop the skills  
and confidence I need to  
make my dreams come true,  
as well as the courage to keep  
dreaming.*

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was resoundingly defeated. Most of the students at TAMS came here to get away from the cliques and football worship so rampant at most Texas high schools. I have to admit, TAMS does have its cliques, but they're not nearly as predominant as they were in high school. Everyone at TAMS has at least one thing in common—the motivation necessary to break from high school two years before everyone else. Except for that one thing, everyone here is unique in some way. Students at TAMS are much more accepting of differences than are normal high school students. All the clubs here are totally student-run, so there are many opportunities for student leadership. For example, I'm the president of the Junior Engineering and Technical Society (JETS) and the vice-president of our improv (on-the-spot acting) group. If you have an interest and TAMS doesn't have a club to match it, you can start a new club.

However, attending TAMS does have its drawbacks. In high school, nearly all my teachers knew me personally. They knew what I was interested in, what I did outside of class, and what I cared about. Only the students at TAMS who opt to do research develop this kind of relationship with their professors. I've taken too many courses each semester to have time for research, and my summer job was at a vet clinic. I feel lucky if any of my professors know my name. This fact makes it difficult to get quality recommendations from professors when applying to college. Some colleges will accept recommendations from a teacher that you had in the ninth or tenth grades, but some specify a teacher whom you have had in the past two years. Applying to college from TAMS is generally a difficult task. If you plan to go to the University of Texas or Texas A&M, there are no problems. However, if you want to attend college out-of-state, be prepared to go through some hassles. The TAMS college counselor is excellent, but some colleges have never heard of TAMS. They want you to apply as a freshman because you do not yet have a high school diploma, but they get confused when you send them a transcript from UNT that has two years worth of course credit. TAMS does not have its own transcript, and this fact causes confusion when applying to colleges and for scholarships designed for high school seniors.

Course credit is another subject that I should probably talk about. The TAMS literature states that you will come out of TAMS with two years of col-

lege credit, so you will graduate from college two years early. For most public colleges, including all Texas public universities, this statement is true. However, if you are planning to attend a top tier private school, you will not be graduating in two years. Some colleges will accept only a limited amount of TAMS credit; some accept no credit, but will place you out of the courses you've already taken. One way you can ensure that you'll place out of at least one year of credit is to take AP tests. I feel that even if you spend four full years in college after attending TAMS, coming here is worth it. The education you receive is much better than at most high schools, and you'll be surrounded by your intellectual peers.

TAMS is not lacking in activities available to its students, but several of the "high school" type clubs are either diminished or simply do not exist. TAMS has a band, but it practices only sporadically and has no conductor. TAMS students are barred from attending UIL competitions. TAMS has no official sports teams. Students can participate in the UNT intramural sports teams, but the schedules are sparse and there are only a few teams for each sport. TAMS students can attend all events, and Dallas is only an hour away.

Even though TAMS isn't perfect, I'm still extremely glad that I made the decision to attend. When I begin "normal" college next year, I'll be far ahead of most incoming freshmen. I'll already have had experience with dorm life, roommates, dining-hall food (only trust the pasta), huge lecture classes, college class schedules, teleregistration (one of the most frustrating experiences of my life so far), and general life on a college campus.

#### Jenny Shafer

*Jenny is completing a bachelor's degree in both psychology and biology at the University of Washington. She recently won a Howard Hughes Award to do research in biology and is very active in the Early Entrance Program Drama Club. She is considering graduate work in neuroscience or neurobiology, or an M.D./Ph.D. program.*

*Most of the students at TAMS came here to get away from the cliques and football worship so rampant at most Texas high schools.*

I fell on my head as an infant, and my parents often say it was the fall that made me so smart. Maybe it was. My brother never got dropped, and while he's very intelligent he doesn't do as well as I do on tests. But then, he's an athlete, while I have only a nodding acquaintance with sports (if someone mentions a sport, I can nod and say, "I know what that is"). So maybe the fall simply spilled all the innate ability I was ever going to have into one cup—academia. Or, not.

I often get extremely uncomfortable when people comment on how smart I must be. Part of this, naturally, is my ingrained sense of social convention: don't brag, don't hurt anyone else's feelings. How am I supposed to answer when somebody asks me, "So, you must be a genius, huh?" Another part of my discomfort is the fact that I don't consider myself all that much more intelligent than most people. I happen to be a very good test-taker, and I care a lot about doing well in school and, more importantly, about learning things, and that is probably why I've been getting into special programs for practically my entire life. My parents tell me I learned to count at two and read sentences at four, and that I taught myself how to do both. "You learned to count by

watching my digital clock at night," he recalls, "and we had the hardest time convincing you that zero doesn't come after 59."

I've had exactly two years of normal school, kindergarten and seventh grade. I took an IQ test after my kindergarten year to get into Quest, an accelerated program for first through sixth graders. The minimum score for full-time Quest was 135, so I know I must have gotten at least that, but I don't know my exact score. I still don't. My parents never told me, and when I got a little older, I decided it was much better not to know.

I stayed in Quest throughout elementary school, so I can't really compare it to normal school. But from what I've gathered from my brother and some friends, it was pretty much like normal school, except that we went through more material and faster. My junior high was

fine. I was in humanities there, an accelerated social studies/language arts class, and honors math (pre-algebra), but I had a basically normal curriculum. It was during life science in the fall of seventh grade that I heard about the Center for Talented Youth (CTY), Johns Hopkins University Talent Search.

I took the SAT test in January, when I was 12. Dad arranged to send my scores to a couple of community colleges and the University of Washington (UW). I didn't know what to make of my score when I got it, but all the friends I asked seemed to have done worse than I had, so I felt rather pleased with myself.

Several weeks later, UW sent me a packet of info about the Early Entrance Program (EEP). My parents looked it over and strongly encouraged me to look into the program. I agreed to investigate, but I didn't really want to go into EEP. We arranged for an interview and a tour of the transition school.

It turned out that my student host was Tanya Rehse, an old classmate from fifth grade. The day started at 8:30 with history, then English. Then Tanya took my mother and me to her college class, Psych 101.

"What do you think is a big class?" she asked me as we took seats near the front. "How many students?"

"Thirty, maybe?" I suggested.

Tanya smiled at me with a poor-innocent-child kind of look on her face. "This class has more than 200 kids in it," she informed me.

I was impressed. I'm not any longer, of course, because I took the same class myself last year.

I don't remember much about the interview, except that we discussed my trip to Amherst and my writing, and at one point one of the women said, "I sense your ambivalence about coming here." I didn't dare ask what ambivalence was. I personally think I did rather pitifully in the interview, mostly because I was my typical, withdrawn, stammering self. They must have gotten a good impression of me, though; I know for a fact that there were more than 14 other students applying for the Transition School that year. I had to prove my worth once more, though, so Mom arranged to have me take the WPCT test. Normally, I would have had to take the Stanford-Binet, too, but since I took the SAT, I was exempt. I did well enough to make Dr. Robinson, the director of the pro-

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*I often get extremely uncomfortable when people comment on how smart I must be. Part of this, naturally, is my ingrained sense of social convention: don't brag, don't hurt anyone else's feelings.*

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gram, and Dr. Noble, the EEP counselor, happy.

At this point, I started telling people in school that I wasn't coming to school next year. I liked the dances and lunches in seventh grade; but other than that, school wasn't especially thrilling for me, and I had absolutely no problem with leaving it. Somehow, between the interview and the end of school, I had absolutely gotten my heart set on going to TS. I'd always been dimly afraid of high school—not high school in general, just my senior year. I thought I would walk around in a perpetual gray fuzz of apprehension—going off to college, entering the real world, becoming an adult. I knew that through TS I would be able to avoid that, and going to UW would simplify my college choice enormously. And, in being a kid while I went, I wouldn't have to face all the somewhat sinister implications of being an adult. I'm not sure why I thought this, since going to college early actually forced me to start acting and feeling more like an adult, but that's what I thought.

I did all right in transition school history, English, and pre-calculus, but physics was a serious problem for me. Our grading system was based on a 1-2-3 system: 1 meant we were doing very, very well, 2 meant we were progressing nicely, and 3 meant we were in trouble. My first-quarter grade was a 3. I think it would have been a 4 if the grading system had gone that low. I really didn't like the class, and I think the only reason my grade improved in the second quarter was that I wrote an English essay on my puzzlement with light, and my English teacher showed it to my physics teacher. "Aha," he must have thought, "she does think about physics! Maybe there's hope for her!" My physics teacher somewhat delicately suggested that I might do better in fields other than lab science, but I recently took a non-calculus physics class and got a 3.8 in it and enjoyed it. I suspect his physics class isn't the best predictor of later performance, maybe because he used to teach grad students, who had years of experience in hard science. I didn't have that background and neither did most of my classmates. Most of the time, this wasn't a problem for us, and really, I think the physics class prepared me for the worst UW could dole out. Maybe it was a good thing?

During spring quarter, my classmates and I got to drop physics and take our first university class instead. I took astronomy 101. I've always liked astronomy, and the speech class I had reluctantly

concluded I ought to take was full. It was an intro class, one of those large ones Tanya had introduced me to. Once I got used to the lectures, I did well in the class and found I liked the university format. One of the things I liked was my anonymity. Though I know teacher-student communication makes for better learning, I have always been shy, so I appreciated being left alone during lecture.

Dr. Noble cornered me one day and suggested that I apply for the honors program. She assisted all of us in planning our fall schedules and told us about our high school deficiencies and why it was a good idea to get rid of them as quickly as possible. I was planning on taking a 400-level English class on Arthurian romance, but Dr. Noble told me it was a bad idea and suggested that I take a writing link instead. She also suggested that I not take summer classes that year, since TS was a fairly stressful year and I needed to recuperate. I followed all her suggestions. I was sort of embarrassed one day when Dr. Noble asked us all what we thought we'd like to major in. Other students responded with computer science, engineering, medicine, women's studies, but I was the only person who said English. I didn't really know what I wanted, which gave me a lot of worries for the next year or so. But, after a few talks with my dad and Dr. Noble and some straightening out in my own mind, I came to terms with my somewhat annoying indecision and indirection.

Every once in a while during my TS year and my freshman year, I wished I had stayed in junior high, mainly so that I'd have some friends to do things with. Most of the time, however, I haven't regretted my decision at all. I was bored in school. I had nowhere to go. And I found better, if fewer, friends at EEP than in seventh grade. But every once in a while, I'd start feeling lonely and isolated, and I wondered what going to high school would have been like.

Although my first day as a full-time college freshman was a very anxious one for me, I soon settled in and enjoyed myself. The classes were no harder than TS, and there were fewer of them,

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since a full load is three, five-credit classes instead of four. I did miserably in calculus and gave up on it after the first quarter, but over the next two years I tried classes in philosophy, oral interpretation, psychology, drama, and more astronomy, in addition to my honors core courses, western civilization, and chemistry. I fell in love with the field of psychology. This, I decided, would be my major.

Lately, I've been thinking about medical school. It's not that I want to go to med school to be a psychiatrist; I want to be a psychiatrist so I

can go to med school. That's one thing about me and my wavering on my major. I want to learn, and I want to learn a lot. I like psychology because it tells me how people's minds work. Medicine tells me how people's bodies work. Chemistry and physics and astronomy teach me how the rest of the world, the constant part, works. I think that's what made the Early Entrance Program such a perfect choice for me. I want to learn so much, and skipping high school not only spared me the slow, agonized learning that other people are willing to adopt, but it gave me four extra years in which I could explore my world.

If I had stayed in high school, I would have been wasting my time. That is the firm conclusion

I've come to after a very small amount of thought. I'm absolutely sure about this because I fit in at UW. I'm competent to handle the workload and the adult responsibilities. And, very importantly, I'm comfortable at UW. It's my school. I do wonder what high school would have been like, but that's more of an objective, abstract interest. I haven't declared my psychology major yet, but I will in the fall, once I finish my physiological psychology class and, I assume, get a 4.0.

I'm doing some cognitive research over the summer, specifically tests on infant monkeys in the basement of the medical center. It's really interesting, and I almost don't mind the heat, my hair tickling my face for two hours, my long-tailed macaque subject who screeches and pitches fits at the sight of any male, the cold salty smell of the juvenile room, and the constant worry that I'm

going to get encephalitis and die. My, what an interesting consequence of falling on my head at six months. If I had been a breath under 16 when I applied for the position, they wouldn't have taken me. I also have to have permission from my parents to be a subject in psychology studies for extra credit. Most of the time, my fellow students are understanding and still treat me as an equal, even after they learn my true age (which I don't broadcast). Unfortunately, the university itself isn't very well equipped to handle minors in its school system. Dr. Noble once told me about an opportunity to earn some money being a psychiatry "patient" for the adult psychiatry board finals. When the student asked my age and I told him I was 15, I was taken out of the room and apologized to because I was too young to be a participant. I did get the money, so I'm not overly vexed at them, but the application I filled out never mentioned the age requirement. I usually have to be very careful to check about policies on minors, permission slips, and alcohol at parties.

Every once in a while, usually during class while I'm taking notes, or walking to the EEP lounge from the university bookstore, I'll take a sudden step out of myself and think, *Oh, my! I'm a junior in college now and I just turned 16. I'm at least three years younger than all the other juniors. I can't even drive and everyone just accepts me!* It shocks me for a second and then I think, "cool," and move on.

EEP is a good program. It gave me, among other things, mental stimulation, a source of pride, better understanding of what I and other people can do, and the knowledge that people don't have to conform to the standards of modern education if they're really suited for something else. Apparently, I was. I don't know how well I would have done in high school, but by now, I don't really care. I know other people equally as smart as I am have done fabulously in high school. I don't know exactly what it takes to qualify for Early Entrance, other than good academic performance, an enjoyment of learning, and a willingness to leave the social atmosphere of high school for the academic atmosphere of college. Not to say we don't have parties and get-togethers and sleepovers and fun, but we do it in the context of a university education. I genuinely enjoy school. I did before TS, but not as much, and it wasn't as much of a priority. Now, school isn't just the biggest part of my life, but the most important, and the most

*I don't know how well I*

*would have done in high*

*school, but by now, I don't*

*really care.*

interesting. I think it would have to be for anyone in the Early Entrance Program.

**Dan Shiovitz**

*Dan graduated from the University of Washington, with a double-major in computer science and English. He is currently a first-year graduate student in the computer science program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, working towards a master's degree.*

Since age two, I've lived in various Seattle neighborhoods, and I've always attended public schools, partially for financial reasons, but partially for philosophical reasons on my parents' part. My early memories of preschool are buried too deep to extract, and I have only one memory of kindergarten. In the middle of a class project involving doing designs in chocolate pudding on wax paper, I was snatched from my desk and told to proceed down the hall to an advanced reading group.

In elementary school, I was in the APP classes (Advanced Progress Program), then called IPP (Individual Progress Program). All either acronym meant was that I was in the higher of the two gifted programs available in the school system. In Seattle schools at least, these gifted programs were always situated in the neighborhoods with a high percentage of minorities, in order to insure that the schools would have a balance between White and Black students. Of course, what this really meant was that the gifted kids, who were almost all White, and the more diverse regular students hardly mingled at all. However, the high schools did not have separate gifted programs, merely advanced placement classes, so if I had continued on the regular track, I would have seen a much more diverse student population.

My education in elementary and middle school was pretty good, and I was generally happy. I have vivid memories of a few really excellent teachers, and other memories of amazingly unexceptional ones. I never skipped a grade, but I was one of the last handful of students to take advantage of an unusual program that allowed us to spend fifth grade at the middle school instead of the elementary school.

During seventh grade, I participated in the Johns Hopkins Talent Search and took the SAT. My scores were high enough to convince the people at the Early Entrance Program (EEP) at the University of Washington (UW) to speak to my

parents. I ended up in the program's offices for a few days taking tests, the only ones of which I remember involved stacking colored blocks and reciting strings of numbers. I'm not sure what happened next, but the end result was that I got invited to enter the EEP. My mom thought I ought to enter this program, which would mean missing at least my eighth-grade year. Worrying about lost friendships and hard work and stuff, I didn't wish to do it. Hot words ensued. Eventually, after discussing the situation with the program's counselor and a few former students, I decided to try it. In September, I entered the transition school (TS) on campus, which is the one-year preparatory program prior to UW entrance.

My TS classmates reminisce about it being quite hard work and needing to stay up late to write papers. I recall it as being hard, but not as hard as they said. This may be partially due to exaggeration on their part, and partially due to my instinct at the time, which always led me to sacrifice hard work in order to get more sleep. In retrospect, this may have been the wrong path to take. Support for this theory is given by the fact that my progress reports almost invariably consisted of "Daniel is a bright student, but should really be working harder," and that I came close to failing one of the four courses due to the deficit between the number of assignments I had turned in, and the number I was supposed to have turned in. Eventually, I muddled my way through, and graduated from this section of the program at the end of the year.

Once again, there was disagreement in my family over my future plans. Unknown to me, my parents had expected that I would enter high school after completion of the program. I, who had initially been opposed to the EEP program but was now a full-fledged supporter, had been under the impression I would continue with the actual early entrance to college. This time, however, I was triumphant, and in September I became a freshman.

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As I write this essay, it is the summer after my fifth year of college. I am currently double-majoring in English and computer science, and I expect to graduate in the spring of 1997. My grade-point average is approximately a B+, and will hopefully continue to rise as it has for the past two years. For comparison purposes, this is significantly higher than the university average, but probably lower than the average for Early Entrance students.

The statement about my GPA rising should have alerted you to the fact that my early college

years were nothing to be proud of. While never actually failing any classes, my performance was not particularly good, either. It was not so much that the classes were especially difficult for me, but that I had no reason to care about them. That, combined with not having developed enough practical study skills, left me in bad shape. Still, my record was spotty rather than uniformly glum. I had high marks in some psychology classes and was quite close to declaring a major therein, when I realized my English grades were, in fact, much higher overall. I had discovered that I enjoyed both reading literature and writing about it, so I entered the English program at the start of my third year. This was also roughly the time that my grades

started to rise. Tentatively at first, but then faster, they soon climbed upwards. This pleased me, and apparently it also pleased the admissions people in the computer science department, because when I applied to that department at the end of my fourth year, they were willing to overlook most of my early grades. I decided to major in computer science in addition to English, not only because I discovered an interest in almost all parts of the field, but also because the additional major would make it much easier to get a job when I graduated.

My entry GPA was really not quite up to par for the average of that department, and to this day I am convinced that the deciding conversation between the admissions committee members went something like "Well, I suppose we can squeeze one more in. Who's the best on our reject pile?" "Some kid named Dan Shiovitz." And that, as

they say, was that.

I hope I have not disappointed the guardian angel that was responsible for my admission, and I am indeed proceeding with better grades within my two majors than without. Along the way, I have managed to take a good amount of Hebrew, psychology, general philosophy, and various other courses from a wide range of disciplines.

Overall, I am generally pleased with the academic aspects of early entrance. It is hard to speculate about the alternatives, of course, and whenever people ask if I wished I had gone to high school, I point out that I didn't, so how can I know? But certainly, there were a lot of good things about pursuing my education this way.

I have even less facts with which to discuss the social aspects of my decision. I've never been a very people-oriented sort of person, and one of the benefits of the psychology classes was an introduction to psychological typing and a greater understanding of personality differences. My friends are different now than they were in previous schools, and I have indeed lost contact with most of the older ones. In general, though, strong friendships will not be broken when one of the people changes schools. I don't know what to say here to someone worried about this except that new friends are also a good thing, and that my experience has shown me that you keep the old ones who you care about. In regards to my future life, I have no personal goals or aspirations, save that I would like to go parachuting sometime. Although occasionally racked with doubt and the usual teen angst, I'm not worried about what will happen. I do feel prepared for the future, and I don't think I suffered by entering college early and bypassing high school.

I'll probably end up working in various computing and technical fields after I graduate, although I'm currently working on graduate applications to the computer science program, so the working world is still a distant shadow. Well, not entirely, since I have done various jobs while in school, such as working as a campus computer lab assistant, but as permanent and exclusive activity, work and I are unacquainted.

I'd like to close this with a few things that might prove helpful to people considering gifted education in general, and early college entrance in particular.

Remember, there are different kinds of gifted kids. People who are good at one thing are not

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*Although occasionally racked with doubt and the usual teen angst, I'm not worried about what will happen. I do feel prepared for the future, and I don't think I suffered by entering college early and bypassing high school*

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always good at everything else, and shouldn't be expected to be. Conversely, kids who are good at one subject shouldn't be taught only in that subject—a well-rounded education is amazingly important at all levels.

In the same way, kids learn differently. There's no reason to teach everyone that it's a vital job skill to be able to sit quietly at your desk and do worksheets, because it's simply not true. Teachers are not in the business of raising sheep.

All kids deserve to be educated to the level of their abilities. Gifted kids shouldn't be pitted against other special-interest groups for funding, or for getting teachers and support.

On that note, I'll conclude. This essay is dedicated to all the good teachers I've had; I hope you know who you are. Thanks.

#### Justin Smith

*Justin is currently at Caltech working in computational and neural systems, a multidisciplinary field combining neurobiology, electrical engineering, and computer science, among other fields. His long-term plans include working in pattern recognition, decision theory, and ultimately, artificial intelligence. Justin is also active in theater arts at Caltech.*

I arrived at the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science on August 24, 1995. As I walked through the main entrance, little did I realize all the experiences I would have while in the dorm. As I looked around my dorm room for the first time, I couldn't help but think, *I have to live here for two years?* It was a small, 10 x 16 foot room with a sink, two beds, and two desks. And I had to share this crowded space with another person, a complete stranger whom I hadn't even met yet. At first, I didn't think it was worth living in the dorm to get the type of education few people in the world can claim to have had. But, as I look back on the experiences I have had so far, I realize how wrong I was.

TAMS is an incredible experience. Imagine 400 people, some of the most gifted high school students in the state of Texas, all living in one dorm and attending college-level courses on a daily basis. Then, imagine exciting organizations, on-campus events, and frequent, sponsored trips to various places in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and around Texas. Take all of that, multiply it by 1,000, and you have TAMS. For many students, the unique combination of academics, people,

organizations, and social events makes TAMS two of the best years they have in their academic life.

*But if I go to TAMS, I would have to leave my home. My friends!*

It is hard to adjust to TAMS at first. The combination of leaving home, having a roommate you don't know, and the concept of dorm food is scary for a lot of people. You also have to leave your high school friends behind and make new friends, which isn't easy. Members of the TAMS staff work hard to help everyone adjust, and they are constantly coming up with ideas to improve the transition. There are lots of clubs to get involved in, so it's easy to find people who have the same interests as yours.

The important thing is to get involved from the start. Once you make friends it is easier to adjust to the dorm. Knowing other people who are in the same boat helps a lot. It is a worthwhile experience, but only as long as you don't become a room hermit. After all, no one likes hermits.

*The classes are just like high school ... right?*

Wrong. All the courses TAMS students take are regular university courses with regular university students. That's what differentiates TAMS from all other similar programs in the country. Granted, you will be in classes mostly made up of TAMS students the first semester, but at time goes on, you will be in classes with fewer TAMS students. Last semester, I was the only TAMS student in one of my classes. Also, you may think you can just breeze through college the way you did in high school, but you can't. You will have to actually study. It sounds horrible, but it isn't. You learn to work studying into your class schedule, club meetings, and personal life.

*I'm a member of several organizations at my school. Are there any clubs at TAMS where I can find other people who have this interest?*

There are many organizations at TAMS, and they all cater to different interests and hobbies. Get involved in organizations that sound fun to you. They are a way for you to meet other people like you and to get involved in the TAMS experi-

*The important thing is to get involved from the start. Once you make friends it is easier to*

*adjust to the dorm.*



ence. There are organizations for people who like to play games, like to debate, play an instrument, want to go into math or engineering, and people who want to preserve nature. There is even a theater group at TAMS.

*I like to be spontaneous. Will there be anyone else around like me?*

A lot of things around here are spontaneous, and that's one of the things that makes TAMS special. An actual network recently sprung up on my wing simply because we wanted to create one.



*You will have to actually study. It sounds horrible, but it isn't. You learn to work studying into your class schedule, club meetings, and personal life.*



Informal things like that happen all the time. One of the jokes at my interview day was that would stay up all night arguing over the relative properties of zero and one. That's actually pretty close to the truth. While there is a group here that debates current issues, a lot of people will get together and argue over the strangest things from dawn until dusk. Of course, you may be wondering whether anyone sleeps around here. Some of us do, and some of us don't. Either way, it is part of the experience.

*But I've never had to study before. I don't even know how to study!*

Most people arriving at TAMS have probably spent less than 15 minutes total in their lives actually studying. It's not easy in the first semester because you have to learn how to balance your time and your budget, study, and keep organized. There are seminars designed to help you learn how to do some of these things, but there is one thing you must have before coming up here: willpower. There is no one here who will make you get up and go to class. There is no one here to make you study for exams. It's all up to you.

*I don't know . . . living in a dorm sounds so horrible!*

The idea of living in a 50-year-old dorm, sharing a community or suite bathroom, and (ack!) eating dorm food isn't appealing to many people. But it's cool. Everyone here already has one trait in common—we're all gifted in math and science. It gives us a common bond on which to build relationships. Once you get caught up in activities and friendships, you forget the fears you had

about dorm life, and you learn to tolerate the dorm food. After you go home for winter break you will be surprised at how strange it is to have to adjust to home life again. At some point, you will even come to think of the dorm as home.

*What don't you like about TAMS?*

Someone once told me that in college, if you don't have anything else to complain about, you complain about the food. Well, I'm complaining about the food. I never thought home cooking could be so good until I lived off of dorm food for an entire semester. In all fairness, the cafeteria can cook pretty good food sometimes, but bring money, just in case you need to make an emergency fast food run.

Seeing as TAMS is barely a decade old, there are still problems; but, by now, most of the problems are minor. Everyone has a complaint about one rule or another, and a lot of people complain about the mandatory junior seminars. However, most of us acknowledge that the rules do serve some purpose—if nothing else, our parents wouldn't let us come without them. And the rules aren't really that bad compared to some of the other programs I am aware of. There are also problems regarding the English courses we have had to take, but as far as I know, the problem has been remedied.

Due to its relatively young age, TAMS is also dynamic. Changes are being made to make the policies as transparent as possible while making life for all of us easier. Something to keep in mind, though, is that TAMS won't work for all people. If it does work for you, then you will have the experience of a lifetime. I would go through it all again, take up the opportunities I missed, and re-experience the opportunities I had. As I walk out of this dorm for the last time, I will, without a doubt, cherish the past two years of my life.

#### **Jennifer Snyder**

*Jennifer Snyder is at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, pursuing both a masters and doctoral degree in economics. Her specialty areas include economic policy in Latin America and international economics and public finance.*

Four years ago, I had to make a decision, a decision that would affect the rest of my life. I chose a path that was very unusual—I chose to begin college at the age of 14. I discovered the Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) in

eighth grade. PEG received my name through the Midwest Talent Search and sent me mailings on the program. At first, I was not interested in the program. However, my mother thought we should ask for more information before ruling it out as an option. The more information we received, the more I became interested in PEG, and the more my mother started becoming nervous about letting her 14-year-old daughter from Minnesota go halfway across the country to a small town in Virginia.

I had two other options. One choice was to go to the public high school in my town, a suburb of Minneapolis, and try to complete high school faster than the average student by doing supervised independent studies in addition to the typical classwork. This option would entail teaching myself the material in a semester instead of taking a full year to learn it in the classroom. The other choice was to go to a private high school that insisted I take the mainstream high school courses and would not allow me to advance at my own pace. Neither of these options were ideal.

PEG was unique. It offered me the chance to pursue academics at a challenging pace and have a peer group my own age with whom I could talk and share experiences. I admit, at first I did not believe that I could be successful in college—that I could do well both academically and socially. I was in eighth grade, planning on completely skipping high school and becoming a college student at the age of 14. It sounded crazy to even consider it, and my teachers, family, and friends thought that I would not succeed. However, I had to try.

That first semester was by far the most difficult of my college career. I needed to adjust to living in a dormitory, as well as living thousands of miles away from home. I had a peer group that understood me and accepted me, which was something I had never experienced before in my entire life. The camaraderie I shared with the other girls in the program helped smooth the transition from home to college. I also needed to adjust to a different academic environment. I began college with the impression that I was going to become a doctor, therefore I took many science classes. My first test was in my principles of biology class, and I received an F. I was absolutely devastated. After that, I actually studied for all of my tests. Studying is a very important concept for a college student to learn, and after my first test, I definitely learned that lesson.

(By the way, I did receive a B as my final grade in the biology course.)

My sophomore year was the year to decide my major and to prove to myself and to everyone else that I could succeed academically in college. That year I discovered mathematics (calculus) and economics, and I learned to enjoy Spanish, my true academic loves and my major and minors, respectively.

My third year in college was the year I really became integrated with the rest of the campus. I began taking leadership roles, serving on committees, joining societies, which increased the number of my traditional-aged friends. That was also the year I received the Harry S. Truman Scholarship, a \$30,000 graduate school award for people interested in pursuing a career in public service. I was selected as one of 70 students nationwide, and I was the youngest student ever to become a Truman Scholar. Competing in this national scholarship program helped me focus on what I wanted to do with my life and decide what was important to me. At the end of my junior year, I spent a month living with a family in Costa Rica while taking intensive Spanish language and culture classes. This experience reinforced my plans to work in the international arena.

During my senior year, I was the resident advisor for some of the PEG sophomores and the older entering PEG students. I was president of the college Honor Scholars Society, was involved in many other organizations, and I had to write my senior thesis. This final year was all about survival. I was ready to move on with my life, and I felt comfortable and confident doing so. I graduated *magna cum laude* from Mary Baldwin College three months before turning 18.

Deciding to go to PEG and Mary Baldwin College was the best decision I have ever made, and I will never regret that choice. Mary Baldwin College, a small, liberal arts, all women's college, provided me with the environment I needed to become a self-confident, mature adult who has learned to integrate and socialize with people of all

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ages. I have come a long way from the shy, self-conscious girl who entered PEG in 1992.

Currently, I am studying for my master of arts in international relations degree at Syracuse University's Maxwell School. My concentration is international economic policy and my geographic area of interest is Latin America. After receiving my degree in a year and a half, I plan to work as a foreign service economic officer.

I would advise any student facing the same problems and decisions I had to make five years

ago to consider the pros and cons of alternative options available to them, including the early college experience. Then, after full reflection on all possible opportunities, decide on a program or school that provides both challenge and support.

The next step is to work hard to get the most from the experience. Be willing to take risks. It was a big risk for me to begin college when my friends were starting high school. I am so glad that I decided to try an early college experience. The Program for the Exceptionally Gifted at Mary Baldwin College is not the right program for everyone, but it was the right program for me.

#### Arturo Zamora

*Arturo Zamora is a junior at the University of Washington working towards admission to the department of aeronautics and astronautics engineering. He is also pursuing a minor in speech communications. Arturo plans a career in aeronautical engineering. In the summers, he interns at the Boeing Company.*

I was born in Mexico City, but have lived in the United States most of my life. I am now a junior at the University of Washington, as a pre-engineering major working towards admission to the aeronautics and astronautics department. I hope to gain a master's degree in engineering and work for Boeing upon graduation. Aside from school, I enjoy messing around with friends, wasting time on the computer, reading, and sports. I find building airplane models a relaxing and enjoyable pastime, and I hope to get into

radio controlled model aircraft.

I consider myself to be your typical 16-year-old; I like to drive around with my buddies, go camping, play basketball, and generally run amok. Somewhat paradoxically, I also know I am not exactly the average 16-year-old, nor are my buddies. We have all chosen to accelerate our education by skipping high school and entering the University of Washington via the Early Entrance Program (EEP). I want to emphasize first and foremost, however, that we aren't "brainiacs," nor are we a bunch of mad scientists in the making. I would like to dispel any and all stereotypes such as these, and let everyone know that we are just like everyone else, save for the fact that we are capable of accelerating our education and have chosen to do so.

There are many youths who are capable of accelerating their education, but not all of them choose to. It is an important decision that must be made carefully and with a full understanding of the commitments involved. Above all, however, the decision must be made by the capable youth, not by moms or dads or brothers or sisters. The following is an account of how I learned about the Early Entrance Program, my decision to apply, my year of transition school, and my first year as a college student.

One of the most influential factors that came into making the decision to enter early was my experience in the American school system. I always loved school. Learning and playing games in P.E. and recess always made school fun. However, there was very little challenge. Furthermore, there were always a few classes that I didn't think I needed and bored me out of my mind. The lack of challenge did provide, however, a lot of free time, which I used to go out and have fun with my friends who were also excelling in class. Likewise, without having to worry too much about homework, I was free to play any after-school sports I wanted to.

One way that the school districts remedied the lack of challenge was by enrolling the brighter students in gifted programs. From second grade up through fourth I was in the Planned Enrichment Program (PEP), which was a great program for kids like me. We worked on developing logic, problem solving skills, pattern identification, and so forth. It was an excellent program, but as with many other programs, such as the Able Learners Program (in which I participated in throughout fifth and sixth grade), it only met once a week.

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Therefore, I met challenge for roughly 20% of the school week.

Challenge became greater as I advanced through elementary school and into junior high. I enjoyed teaming algebra and geometry, as well as basic biology and geology. There persisted, however, a general lack of challenge. As much as I enjoyed school, I still found that it quickly became tedious. All of my classes, except math, rapidly became monotonous, and I would lose interest. I very easily compensated for the monotony by playing after-school sports and spending my ample amounts of free time having fun.

The Center for Talented Youth (CTY) Talent Search presented my first real challenge. While in seventh grade, I was invited to take the SAT and to have my performance compared against that of college-bound seniors and others of my age. I wasn't too happy with my score of 950, but I was able to up that to 1010 the next year. Having participated in the CTY Talent Search proved to be one of the best things in my life. As a result of my scores, I was awarded a one-class scholarship at Gonzaga University in Spokane. I decided to take freshman psychology and had a great time. I lost some of my free time due to the reading and studying the class required, but I had no complaints.

The second, and perhaps more momentous result of the CTY Talent Search came in the mail when I was in eighth grade. In the envelope was literature about the Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington and an invitation to apply. I decided I would like to give it a shot, so my family and I began the application process. This consisted of the Washington Pre-College Test, an IQ test, and two interviews with Dr. Nancy Robinson and Mary Kollar. Dr. Robinson was the director of the Center for the Study of Capable Youth and co-founder of the Early Entrance Program (EEP), and Ms. Kollar was the principal of the transition school (TS). I was accepted into the program, but chose to wait a year to complete ninth grade and allow my father ample time to find work in Seattle.

The decision to apply and accept the invitation took a lot of thought. I wanted to take on a new challenge and it sounded like a lot of fun. I was well aware of the commitments that would have to be made, from tuition to the increased amounts of homework, but I decided I would still enjoy it. It is important to remember that this is a decision

that has to be made by the student. Perhaps more important is the motive behind the decision to accept the invitation to the Early Entrance program—it should be the desire to learn, not to impress people or to fill empty time. Transition school demanded my full concentration and resources, both academic and emotional.

Transition school is specifically designed to prepare students for college life. Students take pre-calculus, history, physics, and English for the first two quarters of the year, then physics is dropped in order to make room for a college elective in the spring quarter.

These classes progress more quickly than high school courses and provide far more challenge. For many students, TS, in and of itself, is a dramatic acceleration. The student can expect an average of four hours' worth of homework per day, although it can fluctuate greatly. I had days with virtually no homework, and weekends with 10-hour physics lab write-ups. At TS, time management is taught hand-in-hand with the classes. It is imperative that the student be motivated enough to complete all the homework and do the proper amount of studying.

Now, I don't mean to scare potential students away, but I feel it is of great importance that it be understood that TS is a big commitment. Although there is a lot of work, there is also a great amount of fun. Once a week, we went to transition school P.E.. The big cheeses at the Center for Study of Capable Youth feel it is important not only to exercise and develop the mind, but also the body. P.E. provides a great way to exercise a bit and have fun running around like a kid should, and a great way for the students to get to know each other.

Once the students develop friendships, they tend to take off. My friends and I took advantage of the new freedom of having class on campus. We are out often, went canoeing, played racquetball, went to the climbing wall, and went downtown. Even though there is a lot of homework, there is still plenty of time to get together with friends and goof off like all kids should do once in a while.

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*I was well aware of the commitments that would have to be made, from tuition to the increased amounts of homework, but I decided I would still enjoy it.*

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For some reason, people always seem to think that joining the Early Entrance Program means an instant death to the student's social life. Similarly, a great many people ask, "What about the prom?" Well, as I just stated, there is no loss of social activity, just the addition of academic responsibility. As far as the prom and other high-school matters such as dating are concerned, there are mixed feelings. Most people, such as myself, really don't care too much about the prom. I always thought it was of no great importance, and quite frankly, a head start

in life is a wee bit more exciting than a dance. Some EEP students do, however, go to their respective high schools for homecoming and proms.

The question of dating does become a bit—for lack of any other word—weird. The administrative powers that be strongly discourage dating, as there are plenty of other things to worry about while in transition school, and a great deal of stresses and pressures that need not be compounded by thoughts of "Does she like me?" and "The opposite sex sure is confusing!" Invariably, however, some dating does take place, but the students usually learn that the head honchos are right—it's not a good idea. All in all, though, everyone ends up being everyone else's buddy.

Upon completion of transition school, we are set loose on the university. We get to be full-fledged freshmen and choose our own classes and begin our educational careers. However, we are not able to declare our majors until we complete certain high school deficiencies such as foreign language courses, English classes, and math. Since I am a native Spanish speaker and completed ninth grade, I was able to complete these requirements during my first year at UW. Most other students, however, take two years to do so.

A benefit of having to keep connected to the Early Entrance Program after completion of TS is that we have various resources at our disposal. Dr. Kate Noble is the resident counselor who is always there to help with issues ranging from which classes to take to more personal dilemmas. Likewise, the transition school teachers are always

ready and willing to assist us in any way they can, as are fellow students.

I have come to greatly appreciate the aforementioned resources. Accelerating oneself academically is challenge enough, but there is much more to it than that. Along with the jump in educational level, there is also a jump in the need for responsibility and emotional maturity. I feel it is imperative that I know what I plan to do with myself over the next four years and proceed to do so. Along with the privilege of being able to choose which classes to take comes the responsibility of choosing the right ones. I have to make progress on my intended major of aeronautical engineering, but I can't totally focus on that field. We are encouraged to take at least one class per quarter that will provide variety from our intended major. Last quarter, I took a speech communications class and had a blast, so I intend to take further classes in this area as a complement to engineering courses in order to achieve a balance of "right-brain, left-brain" use.

Because we have to begin planning our careers, there are new pressures and fears introduced that typical 15- and 16-year-olds don't have to deal with. I am lucky in that my parents don't pressure me to pursue a career that doesn't interest me, but I do put a lot of pressure on myself. I got a 3.71 average for the year, and although everyone congratulated me for the good grades, I am slightly disappointed. I got a 3.1 in a chemistry class in which I should have done better, and a 3.3 in a math class in which I feel I should have definitely done better. This type of pressure can be a bit overbearing at times, but I just turn it into a motivational tool. Likewise, there is the fear of whether I am on the right track or not. How can I be sure that I'm pursuing the career that I will enjoy the rest of my life? The answer is, I can't be sure. However, as I proceed, I will have a greater understanding, and there's nothing like experience to provide real learning.

I have learned a lot in the recent past about a great many things, from how to take derivatives and integrals to the true value of friendship and trust. I have taken a crash course in boy/girl relationships, and learned about the importance of asking for help when it's needed. Most of these lessons came the hard way, so it is important to have a level of emotional maturity that can handle the confusion, fear, and pain that often accompanies these lessons. Likewise, it is important to real-



*Along with the jump in educational level, there is also a jump in the need for responsibility and emotional maturity.*



ize that it's all a part of growing up, and that our choice to accelerate our education has also accelerated growing up.

My experience with the Early Entrance Program has so far culminated in the best way I can think of using the resources I spoke of earlier—I found out about the Inroads Organization. Inroads is a non-profit group that trains talented minorities and hooks them up with sponsor companies looking for interns. I was able to get a summer internship with the Boeing Commercial Airplane Group division of the Boeing Company. I am very excited about this, as I will be learning as much as I can about aerodynamics and aeronautical engineering. I will be getting a great boost to my educational career. I also have the opportunity to obtain a full-time job with the company, upon graduation with a degree in aeronautical engineering. Not only do I learn and have a blast, but I also earn money to pay for college.

For me, all the lessons I learned and the fun I had teaming and goofing off with friends I can really identify with have been well worth the long hours of homework and the fears and confusion. I feel fulfilled with my academic and emotional growth and with the knowledge that I am inching closer to adulthood. My hopes, dreams, and the opportunities that lie ahead far outweigh the bewilderment and fear that I may have encountered in the last two years.

### Early College Entrance Programs

The Advanced Academy of Georgia (AAG) at the State University of West Georgia in Carrollton, GA. Eleventh- and 12th-grade students, non-Georgians and Georgians, enroll as full-time college students. They can earn college credits while simultaneously completing their high school diplomas.

The Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science (TAMS) at the University of North Texas in Denton, TX. TAMS is a state-chartered program that admits Texas high school juniors. Students earn college credits and simultaneously complete a high school diploma.

The Texas Academy of Leadership in the Humanities (TALH) at Lamar University in Beaumont, TX. Students enter after their sopho-

more year in high school and take only college courses. The program admits Texans and non-Texans.

Simon's Rock of Bard College in Great Barrington, MA admits 11th- and 12th-grade high school students to take college classes. Students can receive an associate degree after two years, remain to complete a bachelor's degree, or transfer elsewhere as college juniors.

The Mary Baldwin College Program for the Exceptionally Gifted (PEG) is located in Staunton, VA. The program is for females only. They can enter after completing the eighth grade. Students in the first two years of college study and stay in dorms with other PEG students.

The Clarkson School is on the campus of Clarkson University in Potsdam, NY. This program accepts students after their 11th grade. It provides a college curriculum in the sciences and engineering, which serves as a bridging experience to college studies.

The Residential Honors Program at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, CA. This is a one-year, full-time residential program in which students take college courses that simultaneously fulfill remaining high school requirements.

The Early Entrance Program at California State University accepts students after the seventh or eighth grade. Students attend a year-long transition school, during which they take some college classes. They are evaluated for admission as full-time college students after that year.

The Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington, Seattle, WA is a program of the Halbert Robinson Center for the Study of Capable Youth. It is appropriate for students who are not yet 15 years old. Students enter the program through a year-long transition school, during which they take some college courses.

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