But What About the Prom? Students' Perceptions of Early College Entrance

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Abstract

The Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington enables bright and highly motivated adolescents to enter the University of Washington without attending high school. Previous research indicates that students do well academically at the UW, with grade point averages much higher than those earned by regular-age students, and that they adjust well to college life. This study examined student perceptions of early college entrance, focusing on the reasons students choose this unusual educational option; their experiences with peers, regular-age students, and professors; and the effect of skipping high school on their social, emotional, and intellectual development.

When people learn about the Early Entrance Program at the University of Washington, the first question they often ask is "But what about the Prom?" Many people assume that by skipping high school adolescents will be deprived of critical social experiences, resulting in lifelong regret and perhaps jeopardizing their social and emotional development. The debate about acceleration is both long-standing and well-documented (Southern & Jones, 1991), with the preponderance of evidence strongly suggesting that academic performance is enhanced by acceleration (Kulik & Kulik, 1984). But its effect upon students' psychosocial well-being is less well known and widely assumed to be deleterious (Cornell, Callahan, Bassin, & Ramsay, 1991). Consequently, many parents, educators, psychologists, and counselors urge young people to stay with their agemates and progress at an equivalent rate regardless of differential ability, motivation, or special needs.

Such an attitude can be the "kiss of death" for many bright teenagers. Some become emotionally isolated and intellectually stagnant; as one former Early Entrance student said, "it's like going through every day in a slow motion movie." Boredom, discouragement, and frustration can metamorphose into apathy, causing some students to drop out or function far below their actual level of ability; others, particularly gifted girls, learn to hide their talents and skills in order not to be rejected by their peers (Noble, 1987, 1989). Still other students become depressed and withdrawn, and at-risk for substance abuse, delinquency, or suicide (Robinson & Noble, 1991).

Although challenging secondary programs do exist for some fortunate students, radical educational acceleration into college may be the best option for those middle and junior high school students who need and want more from their education than is typically available in a public or private high school program. Almost every college and university has some provision for admitting students one to several years early, and a number of special programs exist that encourage and support early entrance to college (Robinson & Noble, 1992). One of these is the

Putting the Research to Use

The idea of skipping high school strikes many people as very odd, if not erroneous. Most adults consider adolescence to be the best years of an individual's life, and high school to be the highlight of those years. Teenagers who choose to forego secondary school are thought to be jeopardizing their social and emotional development by missing out on critical experiences (e.g., the "Prom") which they might regret for the rest of their lives. But gifted teenagers in the Early Entrance Program (EEP) at the University of Washington who were interviewed for this study were only too glad to waive these experiences, and all believed that entering the EEP was one of the best educational decisions they could have made. Not only did students build intellectual muscles which might have atrophied in less challenging environments, but they learned how to use them in the service of their giftedness. Further, many found kindred spirits for the first time in their lives, and the experience of friends who "got their jokes" enhanced their socioemotional development in ways that high school never could.

High school may be largely perceived as a necessary and normalizing experience on the road toward responsible, successful adulthood, but it is not a path that works for all gifted students. Neither is early college entrance, particularly without the support of a coherent program such as the EEP. The important point raised by this study is that early entrance provides a more optimal educational, psychological, and social climate for some gifted students than high school. Although it may be a controversial idea, it is one which could be readily implemented on college and university campuses if students were admitted to a well-structured program using multiple criteria, received adequate academic advising, and had a large enough peer group in which to find friends.

Early Entrance Program (EEP) at the University of Washington.

Created in 1977, the EEP enables highly capable young people of middle or junior high school age to enter the University of Washington without attending high school at all. Each year up to 15 students are admitted to the Transition School, a self-contained, 1-year academic program on the UW campus which prepares students for full-time university enrollment the following year. The admission each year of a sizable number of young people provides students with a warm and diverse peer group; in addition, the program furnishes an active support system, facilities which are a home base, and a special advisor (who is also a psychologist and UW faculty member) so that students can mature personally and socially, at their own pace. For a more detailed program description, see Robinson and Noble (1992).

Students are selected for the EEP on the basis of several criteria: scores on the Washington PreCollege Test (similar to the SAT) and the Stanford-Binet IV, a 20-minute essay, achievement test records, class grades, teacher recommendations, extensive interviews with students and their families, and students' own motivation and willingness to undertake a strenuous academic adventure. Candidates' scores on the WPCT are required to meet at least the 85th percentile on either the verbal or quantitative composite, and at least the 55th percentile on the other, compared with high school seniors taking the test and proceeding to 4-year colleges in the state. This insures that students are on a par with entering freshmen at the UW. Although there are no cut-off scores on the Stanford-Binet IV, the majority of students achieve a minimum score of 135; data collected over the past 5 years reveal that early entrants' average scores have been 144 in Verbal Reasoning, 140 in Quantitative Reasoning, and Composite Score 144. By the time they are admitted to the program, most students will have finished at least seventh grade and have taken some algebra.

The majority of students live with their own families in the Puget Sound area, although many commute relatively long distances by bus, ferry, or carpool. Those who come from distant parts of the state or, occasionally, out-of-state, live with relatives or other families. Eventually, as sophomores or juniors, many move into dorms or group living situations on or near the campus.

How do EEP students fare at the University? Our records indicate that 85% of students who enroll in Transition School proceed to the University, where their undergraduate grade point averages tend to be much higher than those of regular-age students (3.5 to 3.6 vs. 3.0). Approximately 95% of these students graduate from the UW or another institution of higher education. Those who drop out or do not graduate from Transition School generally return to high school as tenth grade students. Previous research has found EEP'ers to be as well adjusted as nonaccelerated college students on a variety of measures (e.g., the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, the California Psychological Inventory, the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment) and to resemble National Merit Scholarship finalists more closely than they do average college students (Janos, Robinson, & Lunneborg, 1989; Robinson & Janos, 1986). A study of "underachievers" (students with grade point averages below 3.0) suggested that family and adjustment issues underlay the problems experienced by most such males, while low-achieving females tended to put more of their energy into their social lives. The numbers were small, however, and the gender distinction may well have been spurious (Janos, Sanfilipo, & Robinson, 1986).

Although a fair amount of information about the achievement aspects of acceleration is available in the literature, many questions about students' emotional and interpersonal experiences as early college entrants remain unanswered. For example, no study of students' perceptions of radical educational acceleration currently exists. Therefore, we decided to interview a sample of Early Entrance students to begin to understand the advantages and disadvantages of "skipping high school" from their perspective.

Description of the Study

A structured interview consisting of 13 open-ended questions was developed by the authors based upon questions most frequently asked of students, faculty, and staff about the Early Entrance Program. The interview also included questions about students' direct experiences in the program. These questions were submitted to the Transition School faculty, program staff, and several students for their comments before finalizing the instrument.

Twenty-four students, slightly more than half of all those who had completed Transition School and were currently enrolled in undergraduate university coursework, agreed to be interviewed. Time constraints did not permit the inclusion of all Early Entrance students in this study. In selecting participants we attempted to assure maximum diversity of opinion by including students who represented different genders, ages, academic classes, and areas of concentration, as well as students who would portray as broad a view of their early entrance experiences as possible. Students who had dropped out of the program were not asked to participate; their experiences are being explored through a follow-up study currently underway.

Participants ranged in age from 14 to 21 and included members of every academic class. They represented a broad spectrum of academic disciplines; half were majoring in the physical or life sciences, and half in social sciences or humanities. After the interviews were completed, the data were collated and analyzed for content and frequency. They are presented below in response to specific interview questions. Because of the open-ended nature of this study, frequencies represent the number of students who cited similar experiences within the framework of each question.

Results

Why did you decide to enter the Early Entrance Program? The majority of students (n=15) chose the EEP because it sounded like an interesting idea and because they wanted the challenge and opportunity to accelerate their educations. Most (n=17) were bored and unhappy in junior high school, calling it an "academic dead end." Private schools were

not an option for three because of the expense, and, in the words of one student, "high school looked pretty bleak on all levels." One student who had visited the program as a prospective student remembered and commented upon the degree of respect and independence accorded Transition School students, in sharp contrast to his junior high school experience. Eight students were also attracted by the social aspects of the program. Both males and females had felt isolated and lonely in previous classroom situations. Two 15-year-old girls, one majoring in history and the other in physics, recalled their embarrassment at being labelled "nerd" or "brain" in middle school; one boy, a 16-year-old junior majoring in biochemistry, described how he had been physically assaulted in junior high school because of his intelligence. None wanted these experiences repeated in high school. Two students simply felt they were not as social as high school students typically are.

Four students used the program as a way to prove to themselves and to others that they actually were intelligent. And six students acknowledged that the possibility of skipping several years of school was the decisive element in their decision. Two of these students had decided upon career goals quite early in their lives and knew that they would be spending a great deal of time in graduate or medical school preparing for their careers. Transition School was thus seen as a way to speed up the process. Three other students, less sure about their future careers, were attracted by the wide range of interesting courses as well as the extra time they would have to explore options and career interests.

What did your parents think about your coming into this program? All but one of the students interviewed reported that their parents allowed them to make the decision and were supportive of whatever they chose to do. Fourteen said their parents had been reluctant and apprehensive initially; they were afraid the experience would harm their students socially or academically. Five students' parents were excited by the opportunity but cautious, not wanting to pressure their children into making a choice they would later regret. One 18-year-old student had to convince his parents that the EEP was a good idea because "I hadn't done much in 7th and 8th grades, and they weren't sure I could motivate myself to do the work." Parents were not the only family members to express reservations about the program. According to one 16-year-old physical anthropology student, "my relatives think my parents are crazy for allowing me to miss out on the 'high school experience,' and are angry that I have as much freedom as I do, especially because I am female."

What do you think happens to students during Transition School? Every student discussed how much she or he had matured, intellectually, emotionally, and socially, during the Transition year, becoming less likely to conform without questioning, more individualistic, and more academically aggressive. Fourteen students reported that Transition School taught them how to study for the first time in their academic lives. They learned time management skills and new ways to analyze, organize, and express their ideas in ways that are understandable to others. For two students, Transition School was the first place they had ever encountered others who were at their intellectual level, and this was a humbling, sometimes shocking experience. But it also allowed them to become more receptive to constructive criticism and to realize that there was still much they had to learn. As one 16-year-old junior said,

> We were thrown out of the roles that we had occupied all through school and forced to work for our grades. We learned how to fail. It was very hard and painful at times but I think it was also necessary. I also learned a lot socially. It was a whole new ballgame because none of us was cast in the role of the class brain anymore, or we didn't have to work hard not to be cast that way because we were all pretty much in the same boat academically.

But students were not universally positive in their assessment of the Transition School experience; one young woman, for example, felt that faculty demanded that she "imitate them" rather than be herself and were not as sensitive to students' emotional needs as she needed them to be. Another "hated" the experience because she could no longer procrastinate; she chose to stay in the program because it was "better than high school" and because of teacher encouragement.

What qualities does a person need to be successful in the program?

> You must be willing to work hard despite discouraging circumstances, such as bad grades [said one female student]. You also have to be dedicated to school because you have to more or less ignore the rest of your life during T.S. This isn't as necessary later as an EEP'er. And you have to have a family which will put up with a little insanity when you are having trouble.

Although every student cited intelligence as an obvious but important factor, 15 felt it was inadequate without persistence, independence, curiosity, and resilience. During the first year students must be willing to sacrifice some, but not necessarily all, extracurricular activities in order to prepare themselves in 1 year for full-time university study; 12 students said this required them to be hard-working, willing to learn, and willing to make mistakes, ask for help, and accept criticism. Because self-motivation, commitment, and dedication are vital, two respondents also felt that students must be somewhat dissatisfied with their present academic situations and options in order to attempt this rigorous program.

The ability to organize time well was also cited as essential. Students enjoy a level of freedom in Transition School and the EEP that is not permitted at middle or junior high school. Although faculty are available to guide and support their academic progress, six students said they had had to develop responsibility, self-discipline, and flexibility through experience. Because of the diversity of students' backgrounds, the ability to get along with others, to respect and tolerate others' ideas, and to be open to experiencing new ways of thinking was thought to be critical by four participants. Self-confidence is also a

necessary attribute, but not to the extent of arrogance or egotism; as one student said "pride got me started, but if you stick with that, you die." Students must really want to be in the program, and seven felt that a sense of humor significantly enhanced their ability to cope with and enjoy the experience.

How important is it to have this peer group? "The peer group is one of the most important things about the program," declared one 18-year-old-male, because "EEP'ers need a community of young scholars." Nineteen individuals felt that for the first 2 years, the peer group was essential because of the bond with other students and the lack of outside friends at the UW. Seven people agreed with one young woman who said

> I think it's extremely important because there is such an important element of sameness between us. That's sort of a relief after spending so much time being different. There's always someone available to talk to about your problems and a place to call home.

One of the most important reasons for the peer group, according to three students, is having friends who do not perceive people as strange for being EEP'ers. Two students commented that it was difficult, at first, to have a group of bright peers around because most people initially felt inferior; however, the presence of bright and brighter peers kept them from becoming arrogant.

Most students (n=16) felt the need for the peer group to decrease appreciably over time, especially after junior year or after they declared a major and started making friends outside the program. But younger students found it very helpful to have older EEP'ers around to whom they could ask questions. Only two individuals, both girls, felt that the peer group stayed "constantly essential," but neither had yet declared a major.

Do you have any regrets? Is there anything you wish you could have done that you didn't get to do because you skipped high school? "I'm terribly upset to have missed my prom, football games, cheerleading, and keg parties (just a joke, ha ha, very funny)" said a 16-year-old sophomore. Eleven students said they had no regrets at all. The rest missed various aspects of the high school experience. For example, three students said they missed music and art programs and "extracurricular activities where I don't have to be excellent to participate." Four students missed the social scene and "certain parties," while four others missed debate team, band, and orchestra. Other students mentioned activities such as formal dances, sports, math competitions, chess club, language classes, and a more ethnically and economically diverse student population (the average EEP'er is white or Asian, and largely middle to upper middle class).

Six students felt that had they gone to high school, they would have been eligible for more scholarships and would have had opportunities to attend more prestigious universities. But the majority (n=23) agreed with one 17-year-old female physics major who said "I could have gone to CTY Summer Program at Johns Hopkins or Space Camp. I would have had the time and energy to have more fun . . . but none of this was enough to keep me in high school."

How do you think you would be different now if you had gone to high school?

> Now there's a scary thought [said one student]. Really, it scares me to think about not having had the caring and support of EEP'ers and staff to give me self-worth. I don't know if I ever would have figured myself out at all. I wonder if there are other kids out there who are as confused as I was. I probably would never have figured out what I really wanted to do or what my values are.

Four students thought they would not have been significantly different, but many felt they would have been less able to exercise their academic talents. Ten students said they would not know how to work as hard and would have been less academically oriented. Three said they would have been less prepared for college academically, and three said they would not have been as mature or as aware of the world around them.

Four students reported that they would have been less happy because they would not have had as many friends; four felt they would have been more shy and less self-confident. One 18-year-old student said he "would be alienated and extremely unhappy, perhaps suicidal." Two students thought they would be bored and less energetic, and three indicated they would have been less individualistic and independent. Two students said they might have had a broader circle of friends in high school, engaged in more social activities, and experienced less stress. One felt that high school would have given her four more years to develop a better idea of what she wanted to do with her life, and another thought she might have earned better grades had she attended high school.

Do you feel accepted by regular-age college students? Every student said yes; half the respondents indicated that most people did not know their age, and the other half said that those who knew did not care. As one student reported, on a campus the size of the UW with such a diverse student population, "regular age is a misnomer." Two students qualified their positive answers by saying that they felt more accepted after their sophomore year, often because by that time they had reached a level of physical maturation which enabled them to blend in better. All students said they were occasionally, albeit good-naturedly, teased about their age, but two reported feeling distance and jealousy from some older students, and three felt they had at times been overprotected or patronized.

How do you think you are different from other people your own age who went to high school? Eight students felt they were more responsible and mature, both intellectually and emotionally, and more focused; seven said they had a better sense of direction about graduate school and career goals. Nine thought they were more open-minded, more intellectual, more individualistic, less shallow, and more comfortable being different. One male student commented, "I have different interests; mine are classes, reading, travelling, and going to shows. Their's are sports, dances, and dating." Two female students added that they were less concerned with dating and the Prom. But one student said that in her experience, high school students "were

more interesting because they had more time to develop their interests; more easy-going, and easier to get along with." Three individuals felt that beyond having harder school work, there was no difference. The words of one 18-year-old student seemed to represent best most students' opinions:

> I'm more serious. They see education as a way toward physical security while I study for the sake of studying. They move with a little more ease in social situations because EEP'ers pay a social price for what we do. For certain people high school is the safer way to go. I was always different. That difference just manifested itself in my choice to go to Transition School.

Do you feel you are different from regular-age college students and, if so, how? Fourteen students said yes, but their reasons were quite varied. Three felt different because they were younger, six felt they were less experienced socially and sexually, and three said they didn't have as much freedom because they still lived at home with their parents. Interestingly, four students felt different because Transition School had better prepared them for college; they expected the academic work load and were not surprised by the amount they were required to do. Ten students felt no difference whatsoever.

How does your experience at UW differ from regular-age college students because of your age? Any differences reported by students involved their social lives. Six individuals felt that regular-age college students had more life experiences and were more interested in parties and dating than were EEP'ers. Four said that living at home left them feeling more isolated and less officially "grown up." Not yet being able to drive was cited as a difference for EEP'ers under age 16, and all EEP'ers at some point have had to explain to others why they were in college at such a young age. Two students felt that EEP'ers had a better support system and were able to get more out of college because they were better prepared academically and willing to spend more time working and studying.

When/if one of your professors finds out that you are an EEP'er, how does that affect how she or he treats you academically and personally? The UW is an institution with approximately 35,000 students, and most lower division classes are quite large in size. Thus, as 12 students reported, most professors do not know how old their students are, and those who do seem not to care. Four students stated that they had occasionally been patronized by a professor or had received better grades than they thought they deserved. One student said, "I've had some professors act like I'm some sort of supernatural creature and treat me with all this awe and wonder, which I thought was really stupid. With many of them it doesn't seem to make a difference." One student felt disrespected on occasion, and another reported that

> one professor in an English class didn't think I had the necessary depth or experience to write the papers and would have advised me not to take the class (had he known my age when I registered). However I got a 3.7 so he was wrong. I thought he was silly because he didn't know how mature I was, and I thought he was assuming too much.

In some cases being known as an EEP'er had had a positive effect; seven students said that some professors treated them with more respect, challenging them and taking more interest in them and their careers.

What is the best and worst thing about being an EEP'er? For 13 EEP'ers, the best thing was skipping high school, as well as taking interesting courses, being challenged, and being exposed to new ideas and more opportunities. Four students, three of whom were majoring in a physical or life science, enjoyed having a head start in everything. Six liked their ability to think critically about what they were doing, be self-paced, do things most people their age could not yet do, and have friends on the same wavelength.

Is there any disadvantage to being an EEP'er? Four people felt separated from other students because of their age. Two individuals mentioned how annoying it was to have to stop and think about how to answer when asked how old they were or where they went to high school. Two others wished they were able to be more anonymous. Two students complained about the academic workload and stress, grievances that could easily be voiced by regular-age college students. But other disadvantages were specific to being younger students: not being able to drive, having to experience dating for the first time in college; confronting stereotypes about gifted people, missing the experience of applying to many different colleges; and having to decide what to do with one's life at such a young age. One student summed up his and, we believe, many other students' feelings by saying:

> The best thing is being able to critically think about what you're doing and not accept things as they are. The worst is that everything about what I wanted to do used to be very clear, but now there are lots of ideas running through my head. All options seem to be a little bit improper or gray. I'm always unsatisfied and can't answer questions about how things are going or what I'm going to do with my life. Essentially the best thing is also the worst.

Summary

Early college entrance is an exciting if unusual academic alternative for highly intelligent and motivated adolescents. Like all educational options it has its disadvantages and imperfections, although most students emphasized that much of their dissatisfaction resulted more from other people's perceptions than their own experience. For example, it is burdensome and annoying for EEP'ers to be asked frequently if they are "geniuses," to labor under an assumption that they spend (or should spend) all their time studying, or to be told "that we have an obligation to go on to graduate school and pursue a 'worthwhile' occupation. It never occurs to them that we might not want to become renowned research scientists or something on that level" (Crage & Munson, 1990). But weighing the pros and cons, students who participated in this study were unanimous in their satisfaction with their choice to forego both high school and the senior prom, a satisfaction educators, parents, and counselors should not overlook.

High school may be widely perceived as a necessary and normalizing experience on the road to responsible, successful adulthood, but it is not a path that works for all gifted students. Neither is early college entrance, particularly without the support of a coherent program such as the Early Entrance Program, although more moderate approaches do exist and appear to be successful (Brody & Stanley, 1991). The important point to remember, we believe, is that early entrance may provide a more optimal educational and social environment for some highly capable students than high school, and that attending one's prom should not be a criterion for rejecting that option.

In their review of the literature about acceleration and affective development, Cornell et al. suggested that "perhaps . . . it is no longer even useful to debate whether acceleration does or does not have an adverse effect on affective development. Instead, research would more profitably focus on determining for whom acceleration might be desirable, and for whom it might be detrimental" (1991, p. 96). We agree. Although we cannot answer that question at this time, a follow-up study currently underway is investigating the long-term effects of educational acceleration upon the personal and professional lives of four groups of young people: former EEP'ers, students who qualified for the program but chose to go to high school, students who qualified for the program but dropped out, and regular-age students who were also National Merit Scholarship finalists. Hopefully, the data from that study will help us understand how students are faring thus far in their personal and professional lives and assist the educational community better to identify students who would profit from a journey along this less travelled road. Additionally, they might enable us to address some of the myths and misconceptions about the affective effects of radical educational acceleration and the significance of the senior prom.

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