

Early Entrance to College Programs: Accelerating More than Academics!

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Abstract

The author describes two early entrance to college programs at the University of Washington, and the services provided that support students' radical transformations from middle or high schoolers to becoming young scholars in college. Attention is paid in particular to not only the academic skills needed for college success, but also the less tangible habits of mind, views of self, and social and emotional development needed to persist through the challenges they may face in the transition.

Jake is an 8th grader who spends most of his time gaming in his bedroom after school. He never does any homework because he finds it to be busywork, and he passes the tests without doing it. He programs for fun, and has even made an "app" to start his own business. He doesn't see much purpose in going to school for the next four years because he wants to be a computer programmer and start his own business. He is anxious to begin computer science courses at the university.

Lana is a 10th grade student in high school and has completed all of her math courses that she could possibly take in high school. She is tired of the cliques and drama that she sees within her social scene, and craves for more choices of interesting academic classes, particularly in the biological sciences. She has been interested in becoming a doctor since she could remember.

Without trying to generalize, or stereotype, these collective biographies describe some of the characteristics and motivation for students choosing the Robinson Center for Young Scholars' early entrance to college programs. In a recent alumni study (Hertzog & Chung, 2015), the top two reasons why students chose the early entrance programs was that they were looking for a challenge, and they were excited to learn. Over half of the students were disappointed with their previous schooling, and nearly one third reported that being unhappy socially was an important or very important reason for entering the early entrance programs.

The Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars (<https://robinsoncenter.uw.edu>) at the University of Washington is home to two early entrance programs to college. Now 37 years old and one of the most radical acceleration programs in the country, the Transition School accepts students who have finished 7th or 8th grade, engages them in one year of college preparatory classes, and then assesses their college readiness before they enter the University of Washington as fully matriculated freshman at 14. Throughout the year, Transition School students take a rigorous curriculum of English, history, pre-calculus, a laboratory science (this year biology), philosophy, and service learning. In addition to taking coursework, they have weekly tutorials with their teachers, and reflection assignments designed to make them more self-aware of their own study skills, growth, and areas of challenge. In the spring quarter of their Transition School year, they take one university course integrated with college age students, on campus. A complete description of the Transition School may be found in the article, *University of Washington Transition School: College Preparation and Teaching for Transformation*, (Halvorsen, Hertzog, & Childers, 2013). Students who do well in Transition School and have demonstrated the readiness to enter the university go on to become our Early Entrance Program students (EEPers).

UW Academy

The other early entrance program, UW Academy of Young Scholars, accepts students directly into the University of Washington after 10th grade. Students have an extensive orientation program called Bridge before fall classes start and take a science and writing course together with their cohort in the fall term with older Academy students acting as their teaching assistants. They also may take an optional course in Winter Term that exposes them more to opportunities that are offered at the University of Washington including studying abroad, research with faculty, exploring majors, as well as helping them prepare for the world outside of college –finding jobs, scholarships, internships, and experiences that further their learning.

Robinson Center Support Services

Both of these early entrance programs transition students from being K-12 school oriented, to becoming young adults in college. The Robinson Center supports their growth in all of their domains to address not only their academic needs, but also the social and emotional growth that is needed to function autonomously in college and beyond. We have an academic advisor, and an academic counseling intern, who is a recent graduate of one of our early entrance programs to guide students through this process. The academic advisor has mandatory advising appointments for the first two years to assist students to choose coursework that completes

their college academic distribution requirements that they missed by not attending high school, and to check-in personally with students to assess and discuss any challenges they may be facing. The content of the academic advising sessions covers everything from how students are physically coping and handling time management (sleep, studying, recreation), to issues of identity formation, family relationships, responsibility, communication, and pathways for exploring their futures.

Within the last two years, we have added optional group check-ins with students that allow them to bring questions or issues to the staff's attention for group discussion. These sessions have been facilitated by a counseling intern from the graduate school-counseling program at the university, and more recently by our academic advisor who joined the Robinson Center with mental health counseling expertise. Many of the concerns that students discussed involved developing relationships with parents, seeking more independence, and changing their academic goals based on their newly-found interests brought about by taking college courses. In some instances, students struggled with pressures they felt from their parents. As a result, we added evening program sessions to share some of these concerns with parents. Whether or not students should live in the dormitories was a popular topic of discussion.

Parent Programs

We had three main goals of our parent programs: (1) to create and strengthen a community of parents whose children chose to attend early entrance programs, (2) to facilitate discussion among parents who had similar experiences, questions, or concerns, (3) and to provide resources on adolescent development and gifted education. We also wanted to create a space for parents to share cultural differences in childrearing and expectations they had for their children. Hearing directly from parents provided important information to increase our understanding of the students' experiences they were having in the early entrance programs. We know that family lives and relationships change when our students enter college early, and we feel that parents can be great resources for each other as they experience these changes. Much like our cohort model for students, the parents are also a group brought together by the accelerated experience.

The Cohort Model

Students in our programs, especially the Transition School program, rely on each other to navigate increased demands on their academic lives, and yearnings for independence in their family lives. We have a cohort of 16-18 Transition School students, and another cohort of 35-40

UW Academy students each year. Paying attention to the ways that students in these cohorts develop relationships and friendships is an important part of the early entrance experience. We begin the year with overnight camping trips with each group. Older students from each program serve as camp counselors, teaching assistants, and informal mentors to our new cohorts. We have structured mentor programs that provide training to mentors and give students opportunities to get together with their mentors. Students also have organizations that they coordinate themselves including a Drama Society that puts on a play each year and a literary journal. Throughout the year, we hold social activities such as a spaghetti lunch, a “not a prom” dance, cooking days at the end of every term, and “Pi” day when students use the kitchen to mass produce pies. The Robinson Center itself acts a social hub for many of the early entrance students who are too young to live in college dormitories. They come to prepare their lunches, be with other early entrance students between classes, bake cookies, or play games. Walking into the Center, one immediately feels the energy and hears the often sophisticated conversations of the students. The asynchronous development between their academic skills and their social and emotional development is recognized, nurtured, and celebrated. In the alumni study, having a peer cohort was mentioned over and over again as being an important part of the total experience. One student commented, *“Having a peer group of intelligent and motivated learners helped motivate me to do more academically.”* (Early entrance program, alumni).

Going to college early means more than just taking college courses. Students who choose this path enter the adult world of planning their futures two-four years earlier than most young people. They may be making these decisions before they have had time to truly discover their passions, or they may be good at so many subjects, they want to study them all. Double and triple majors are not unusual among this group of students. Although most of the students confront challenges throughout their college years, when asked if they would make the same choice again, “89.5% of the students strongly agreed or agreed, that ‘If I had to make my educational choice over again, I would choose to attend EEP/ACAD.’” (Hertzog & Chung, 2015, pg. 44).

The programs at the Robinson Center continue to evolve and adapt to incoming cohorts. More emphasis is being placed on ways we can enhance the social and emotional growth of our students. We continue to stretch ourselves as faculty and staff to articulate what it takes to nurture the transition from being K-12 students to becoming life long learners and young scholars.



Transition School and Early Entrance Students
at Wallace Falls



UW Academy Students at Camp Indianola

References

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Hertzog, N. B. & Chung, R. U. (2015). Outcomes for students on a fast track to college: Early college entrance programs at University of Washington. *Roeper Review*, 37(1), 39-49.