

Advising High-Ability Business Students

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Students who excelled in high school enter college with the expectation that, despite the increase in competition, they will continue to achieve academically at the college level. Some high-ability students never lose momentum. They view college as the next stop on the road to ongoing success and continue to achieve at superior levels. Other high-ability students find the pressure to succeed at the college level to be overwhelming. In this article I describe some of the characteristics of high ability students and give particular attention to high ability students who are pursuing business degrees. Advising strategies for working with this population are also discussed.

KEY WORDS: adjustment to college, business students, gifted students, high ability students, honor students

Introduction

High ability college students face tremendous pressure to succeed, not only in the classroom, but also outside of the classroom—in cocurricular activities and in the pursuit of postgraduate opportunities. This pressure comes from parents, friends, faculty members, advisors, society, and from the students themselves, and each has expectations that the student will perform at exceptionally high levels in all facets of their lives. Many high-ability business students feel particularly stressed because they are not only expected to perform at superior levels academically but also professionally by moving into high level, high-status corporate positions upon graduation. In this article, I have defined high-ability business students as those students who have been academically successful in high school (rank in the top 10% of their high school graduating class), have performed well on college entrance exams (ACT scores of 29 or above or SAT scores of 1300 or above), have been designated as honors student at the time of college enrollment or have achieved high grades after beginning their college careers (earned a 3.50 cumulative grade-point average (GPA) or above), and have chosen to study business. I explore the phenomenon of pressure to succeed among high ability students with particular attention given to high-ability business students. Some of the common characteristics of these students are described, and advising strategies

for working with high ability students are discussed. I used the current literature and my own observations based on 17 years experience in advising a wide range of students and the past 5 years specializing in high-ability business students to identify student characteristics and advising strategies. Examples from advising high-ability business students will be used to illustrate these characteristics and advising strategies. While not all high-ability business students experience high levels of stress, those who feel pressured benefit from a supportive advising relationship.

Characteristics of High-Ability College Students

Several studies on honors students (Glennen, Martin, & Walden, 2000; Lucas, Hull, & Brontley, 1995; Piland & Azbell, 1984) showed that higher numbers of females and traditional-age students, and a higher percentage of white students participated in honors programs than did their male, nontraditional-aged, and nonwhite counterparts. Other findings on this population indicate that high ability students come from advantaged backgrounds (GDA Integrated Services, 2003; Glennen et al., 2000), have college-educated parents (Gerrity, Lawrence, & Sedlacek, 1993), and attend public colleges (Arnold, 1995).

Long and Lange (2002) compared honors students to nonhonors students and found that honors students were more conscientious and open to new experiences, asked more questions, discussed grades and academic ideas with a professor, prepared for class, worked for pay on-campus, participated in cocurricular activities, and completed more volunteer community service than did nonhonors students. Gender differences were found by Tomlinson-Keasey and Smith-Winberry (1983) in a study in which personal adjustment among gifted and nongifted college students was examined. Female gifted students evidenced superior personal adjustment than did nongifted college females; nongifted men had higher scores than gifted men on self-acceptance, well-being, social presence, and responsibility.

Kerr and Colangelo (1988) examined college plans of three levels of academically talented students. Students defined as moderately and highly talented were most attracted to engineering and health science majors. In this study the higher the academic ability the more students were interested in engineering while the lower the academic ability the more students

were interested in business. However, among the highly talented students, business ranked 7th out of 20 major choices.

Pressure to Succeed

Although much of the pressure to succeed among high ability students may be self-imposed, much of it is the result of external forces. These students feel pressure from parents, friends, teachers, and advisors who expect them to achieve at superior levels. Students who excelled in high school are expected to continue to excel in college and beyond despite increasingly rigorous competition. Zaffrann and Colangelo (1977, p. 314) stated, "Many parents—knowing that their children have superior ability—expect them to accomplish great things; to enroll in the most prestigious colleges and universities to get the best grades to win awards; to consistently do well on exams; to enter 'status careers.'" Faculty members as well as advisors constantly remind students of their abilities and their responsibility to act as good role models for other students. These expectations are difficult to achieve, especially as the competition increases and students begin to question whether they can (or want to) put forth the effort required to consistently perform at the top. In addition, societal expectations are placed on high ability students (Delisle, 1986). These students are viewed as "future leaders" and as "the movers and shakers of the next generation" (Delisle, 1986, p. 558). Parents, faculty, and advisors need to be aware of the messages they send to students and how those messages may be interpreted. Simply encouraging a student to "do your best" may be construed as exerting pressure to get the best grade in the class.

High ability students who choose business face pressure simply by virtue of choosing to pursue a professional education in business. While all business students are expected to be successful business professionals, this message is even louder for high-ability business students. These students are not just expected to be successful business professionals, but they are expected to be the chief executive officers. The stakes are even higher for students who choose to attend highly competitive, highly ranked schools of business. These institutions recruit the top students with the expectation that they will excel in the classroom and in corporate America. Big name business schools often expect their graduates to rise to the top and make a name for themselves, thereby reinforcing the reputation of the business school from which they graduated. This expectation is much greater at the graduate level but is also present at the undergraduate level.

Students' concerns about their abilities to enter successfully and excel in the work world are exacerbated by current economic conditions and reports about job opportunities for new graduates. Statements such as, "Only a quarter of employers plan to increase the number of new hires they will make in 2003" and "The sluggish economy continues to exact a toll on college students looking for their first professional jobs" (Job Outlook Survey, n.d., p. 1) cause considerable anxiety for high ability students who are expected to secure prestigious jobs that offer opportunity for fast track advancement and high salaries. High-ability business students are particularly impacted by this economic news because they are expected to enter the job market upon graduation. Even students who choose to pursue graduate study in business will find that most MBA programs prefer that applicants have work experience prior to admission.

Pressure from peers is enormous among high ability students. Honors classes tend to be small, so students have an opportunity to interact with one another and with the professor. In these classes, the professor places more emphasis on discussion of topics and less on lecturing. While the small classroom experience is ideal for learning, it also serves to challenge students and to promote competition among peers. In honors programs in which students complete a series of courses with a cohort group, the peer pressure and competition among students is heightened.

Not only is competition evident in the classroom, but it exists outside of the classroom as well. In business, students are looking to set themselves apart from the rest of the class by putting themselves on an accelerated pace. Often times this takes the form of searching for internships or career-related work experience as early as the freshman year. In the past few years, internship experience has become a crucial piece in securing full-time employment for students. "'Proven talent' may be the phrase that best describes what businesses want in their new hires" (Bisoux, 2003, p. 25). Instead of providing training programs for new employees, more and more businesses want people who already have the knowledge and skills to do the job. Many high ability students are also compelled to seek leadership positions in student or community organizations and become involved in these groups early in their college careers. Students who are not ready for these types of experiences and cannot match the pace set by the class feel behind and concerned that they are not making it (either academically or professionally).

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is frequently cited in the literature on high ability students (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Day, 1989; Delisle, 1986; Ender & Wilkie, 2000; Kodman, 1984; Strommer, 1995; Whitmore, 1980). Many high-ability students believe that the only acceptable grade is an A and view any lower grade as a failure. This perception of failure can have devastating effects on students who perform “below average” and on those who are trying to preserve academic perfection by maintaining a perfect GPA. Delisle (1986, p. 558) indicated that this strive for perfection results in effort that is “merely a means to an end.” For many students, earning the A is more important than learning in the classroom. In unfortunate cases, students are so concerned about the grade that they lose site of why they are in college. This situation is ironic because honors programs are designed to provide an enhanced learning experience to the recruited high-ability student. Whitmore (1980) referred to students who refuse to challenge themselves unless they can be assured of success as “paralyzed perfectionists.” Many high-ability students choose to take the same subjects in college to which they were exposed in high school because they are familiar with the material and have a high chance of earning good grades in those courses. These students are afraid of challenging themselves in courses in which they have no knowledge base out of fear that their perfect GPA will be spoiled. This tendency towards perfectionism, fear of failure, and consistently setting high expectations is also associated with high anxiety among high ability students. Gordon (1983) found that honors students were more anxious than nonhonors students.

Struggling with Academic Issues

Not all high ability students perform well at the college level. Some students enter college with the expectation that they will get the same grades in college with the same effort (or in some cases, lack of effort) as they did in high school. With increasing competition at the college level, all students are required to work harder than they did in secondary school. Spending extensive time on studying and putting forth extra effort toward academics is a practice to which many high-ability students are unaccustomed (Robinson, 1997; Saunders & Ervin, 1984). In addition, these students may not know how to study and may have difficulty managing their time (Day, 1989; Gordon, 1992). Gordon (1992) also suggested that some high-ability students may have problems with motivation, especially if they were overcommitted to activities in high school.

Burned out students choose not to get involved in college activities. Despite high achievement in high school, some students cannot compete at the college level. The realization that he or she is not “the best” can be a crushing blow to the self-image of the high achieving student. Because these students have always been successful, they do not easily bounce back when faced with failure (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986).

Business curricula frequently have structured design in which students complete certain prerequisite courses in the first year before moving into accounting, statistics, and business foundation courses in the second year. Many students feel compelled to stay in courses despite poor performances so they can stay on track with curricular requirements. For general and high ability business students alike, math can be a stumbling block. Students may score well on college entrance tests and on math placement exams but do not have the conceptual understanding in mathematics to perform well in course work at an advanced level. In addition, students appear to struggle most with math when making the transition from high school to college level academics. College preparatory courses in high schools vary dramatically in mathematics, which adds to the dilemma for students. Some high-ability students who have scored well on advanced placement tests and received credit for one course in a mathematics sequence have difficulty making the transition to the second course in the sequence. However, even struggling students remain in math courses, despite failing a midterm grade, because of a concern that they will not be on track for second-year course work. In addition, some high-ability students believe they can improve their performances during the last term of the course. Because they lack experience with poor performance, they have difficulty knowing when it is in their best interest to drop a course. In addition, high ability students consider withdrawing from a course equivalent to giving up, which they consider an unacceptable behavior for someone destined to succeed.

Multipotentiality

High ability students tend to be interested in a variety of majors and careers and typically have the potential for success in any one of them. Blackburn and Erickson (1986, p. 553) referred to this characteristic as “a problem disguised as a ‘world of opportunity.’” While having a wide range of academic and career options can be an advantage, it can also be overwhelming to high ability students who may be getting pressured to make a choice. As a

result of the pressure and lack of direction, some students may narrow their choices without spending time fully exploring opportunities, or they may make choices based on what others see as right for them (Gordon, 1992). However, some students may not be able to make a decision out of fear of missing something or of disappointing someone who has a vision for their future (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986). Some students end up paralyzed, unable to make a decision that will satisfy themselves and those who have mentored them. Other students remain in a constant state of frustration with the hope that one subject area will surface and stand out over the others (Sanborn, 1979).

Some high-ability business students have difficulty making decisions regarding a specialized business discipline. Students often believe that having multiple specializations is the answer to their dilemma. While some students have examined academic and career information and can present an explanation for why more than one specialization fits with their academic and career interests, other students cannot justify their choice to pursue multiple specializations. Frequently students who plan for multiple specializations do not know what they want to do or believe that the more specializations they can document, the more job offers they will receive. More and more students across the country are pursuing multiple majors with colleges. The University of California at Davis and Massachusetts Institute of Technology report dramatic increases in students who plan to complete more than one major (Gomstyn, 2003). High-ability business students who feel pressured to get high paying, high status jobs may make choices about academics and careers based on employment outlook and may be less concerned about interests.

Multipotentiality can also lead to overinvolvement among high-ability business students who hear numerous messages about the importance of being involved in extracurricular activities. The pressure to succeed pushes these students to take on, in some cases, more than they can handle. Some students become very involved in student organizations, taking on leadership roles in several organizations in which they are organizing campus events and coordinating major projects. Other students work in jobs that begin as 15 to 20 hour commitments but turn into 25 to 30 hour commitments. Students feel torn and uncertain about where to focus their time and energy, and believe that they should be able to balance leadership and work activities along with excelling in academics. These

unrealistic expectations can create problems for the high-ability business student who not only wants to do everything, but also wants to do everything perfectly.

Some high-ability business students are very concerned about credentials and accumulating credentials. Students want to graduate with honors, to have several specializations, to have a minor (or two), and to enter combined programs of study in which they can receive an undergraduate and graduate degree within a shortened time frame. Some high-ability business students spend considerable time planning for multiple credentials by looking for ways to double up curricular requirements. For these students, the value of their academic program of study is defined in quantitative terms, and they believe that multiple credentials will impress employers and graduate schools. Gordon (1983) emphasized the importance of a supportive advising relationship for high achieving students who have multiple interests and abilities. These students need to feel supported as they explore and narrow their options. Students who struggle with multipotentiality also need to feel comfortable expressing their confusion and frustration with the major/career decision-making process. Advisors need to be patient and understanding and to teach students the steps involved in making sound choices about majors and careers. Advisors also need to discourage high ability students from foreclosing too early before exploring the many viable options that exist for them.

Entitlement

Some students who have excelled in academics as well as leadership and other nonacademic endeavors in high school may be self-assured from multiple successes. These students have been treated well by teachers, peers, parents, and school counselors, who have in some cases made exceptions for them because they were good students and positive role models. Some high-ability students expect that this pattern of favorable treatment will continue into college. These students tend to believe that they are entitled to special treatment simply because they have always been exceptional students. High-ability business students who fall into this category of students can be demanding and impatient. In some instances, these students expect advisors to respond immediately to E-mails and telephone calls, to be available for individual appointments at the student's convenience, and to make exceptions to established rules if the student cannot meet deadlines or otherwise needs help. Long and Lange

(2002) noted that honors students can also be high maintenance in the classroom. Perhaps out of concern over grades, honors students ask more questions in class and about grades and assignments than nonhonors students. "Faculty who teach in honors programs need to be aware of the expectations these students have of their time and attention" (Long & Lange, 2002, p. 27).

High ability students need to know when advisors are available for appointments or for open office hours, how to make appointments, and how to make the best use of open office hours. In addition, these students need to understand the appropriate use of E-mail with advisors. Some high-ability students frequently E-mail advisors with questions when the answers are available to them in college bulletins or on Web sites that everyone can access. Advisors also need to inform students when they can expect an E-mail in response to their queries. Some students become impatient if they do not receive a response the same day they send an E-mail inquiry. While students of average ability can also have unrealistic expectations, some high-ability students are particularly demanding because they are accustomed to special treatment in secondary school.

Critical of Self and Others

High ability students tend to be very self-critical, often times placing unrealistic demands on themselves. Blackburn and Erickson (1986, p. 553) referred to gifted adolescents as "excessively self-critical." Not only are high ability students critical of themselves; they are also critical of others. Gifted individuals tend to criticize those individuals who cannot compete with them at a similar level of aptitude (Betts, 1986).

High ability students have little tolerance for and are quick to find fault with faculty members and advisors who do not measure up to their standards. Kennedy, Gordon, and Gordon (1995) found that honors students enter college with higher expectations of the faculty than do nonhonors students. Unmet expectations often result in both frustration and annoyance for high ability students (Ender & Wilkie, 2000). Advisors may be confronted with complaints from high ability students about certain faculty or staff members. These students often ask how and to whom they can voice their concerns and what corrective actions will be done as a result of their complaint. High-ability business students in highly ranked business programs may feel particularly frustrated with a faculty member they perceive as less than excellent. Some high-ability business

students are also critical of nonhonors courses that lack challenge in both the general education and the business curricula.

Advising Strategies

Because of their intellect, high ability students may appear as though they are able to progress through their college career without assistance from advisors. However, high ability students need guidance in dealing with academic and career issues as well as personal and social development (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986; Gordon, 1983; Myers & Pace, 1986; Schroer & Dorn, 1986; Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1977). In reality, most high-achieving students are no different developmentally than other same-age students. All college-age students, no matter how they perform academically, tackle the same developmental tasks that Chickering and Reisser (1993) described as the seven vectors of development: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity.

Academic advisors need to be prepared to offer help and direction to high ability students. Saunders and Ervin (1984) contended that high ability students need just as much attention from academic advisors as underprepared students. In particular, high ability students from minority groups may require a proactive advising approach to help them cope with "issues of integrating their academic lives with their social lives when their friends are not in college or serious about their studies, as well as with the negative effects of racial stereotypes about academic promise" (Robinson, 1997, p. 218). The following strategies are suggested for advisors who are working with an honors population. Several examples of advising strategies are applied to high ability students who are pursuing business majors.

Creating a Supportive Advising Environment

High ability students need to feel comfortable and supported as they discuss concerns about academics and their adjustment to college. For students who perform below their expected standard, talking about poor performance can be difficult. Advisors need to provide a safe environment that allows the high ability student to disclose problems that he or she may perceive as shameful and unacceptable. Advisors must also understand the students' self-perception of poor performance. High ability students may become anxious and upset that they may earn a B in mathematics. Helping stu-

dents put grades into perspective by validating their feelings and encouraging a discussion of the meaningfulness of grades may be helpful. Students also need reassurance that earning one B will not prevent them from being selected for honors opportunities. Some high-ability business students need permission (and often encouragement) to withdraw from courses in which they are doing poorly. They also may need reassurance that even if they drop the course they are still on track to complete the business curriculum in 4 years.

Students who enter the institution as high achievers and do not perform well need special attention. These students may be the least likely to seek help from academic advisors or other support services on campus. Some students lack experience in asking questions and as a result may have difficulty in framing questions and knowing where to go or who to ask for help (Robinson, 1997). They may feel ashamed of their performances, unwilling to confront their feelings, and unable to take the necessary steps to improve their situations. A proactive approach may be necessary to connect with these students. In addition, early intervention with these students is important so that they can be referred to appropriate resources, such as tutoring, study skills, or counseling services, before a pattern of poor performance has been established.

Coping with High Expectations

High ability students need to learn how to cope with the high expectations that others have of them and that they have of themselves. Giving students permission to talk about their fears of failure is a good first step. Students need to know that mistakes and failure are part of being human. Helping students integrate these aspects of themselves into their self-image is key to facilitating growth and development. When stress and anxiety reach unmanageable levels, high ability students need to be encouraged to seek counseling (Ender & Wilkie, 2000).

In dealing with peer pressure, high ability students need to learn the value of setting their own pace. Some high-ability students get caught up in a race to be the best and lose sight of their own identity and the goals that are most important to them. Advisors need to help students clarify values and encourage them to look at establishing their own goals and objectives. Similarly, high ability students who may have been pressured to make choices based on others' expectations need help in identifying their own needs (Gordon, 1983). Some high-ability students need to learn how to develop a life outside of academics. Advisors may need to encour-

age students to get involved in cocurricular activities, to make friends, and to socialize. By asking high ability students what they are doing to have fun, advisors help advisees gain insight about balance in their lives.

High-ability business students need assistance coping with the expectation that they will be successful business professionals and enter high-status corporate jobs. Some students are pursuing a business degree to fulfill this self-imposed goal. For others, the climb up the corporate ladder better matches the expectations that others have for them than it does their own interests. Validating students' feelings and letting them know that they need not conform to preconceived aspirations of others may be helpful. Advisors can also be helpful by assisting high ability students in establishing career goals and connecting them to career counselors who work with business students and can provide information about options that fit their needs and values. High-ability business students who express concern about the job market may also benefit from talking with a career counselor who can present data about employers who are hiring and how recent business graduates from their institution have fared in the current economic climate.

High achieving students may need assistance in reframing the expectations that they have about the faculty (Kennedy et al., 1995). Students may need to take the initiative to make contact with faculty members and let go of the belief that faculty members will take the first step in initiating dialogue. Some high-ability students also need help in understanding that faculty members are human: They make mistakes, and they are not always perfect teachers and mentors.

Being Nonjudgmental

Advisors who work with high ability students need to ensure that they are nonjudgmental in interactions with these students. Advisors may be challenged in helping students who present with concerns about earning a B in a class and maintaining a high cumulative GPA. However, advisors must not minimize students' concerns and keep in mind that every issue expressed as a concern is a valid one and needs to be treated seriously and fairly.

Students who choose to enter business can be described as competitive, enterprising, and achievement oriented, and they value work that offers economic return (Holland, 1997). Advising students who possess these values may be challenging to advisors who espouse very different value systems. Advisors need to be aware of their own values and

how those may (or may not) differ from those of their students. Similarly, while business students are focused on learning as much as they can about business, they may be less interested in general education course work. Advisors who value a liberal arts education may need to temper their reactions to students who downplay or look to test out of courses in the humanities, the social sciences, or the natural sciences.

Providing First-Year Seminar for Honors Business Students

Students who enter institutions as honors students may benefit from first-year seminars that focus on issues that honors students confront as they make the transition from high school to college. At The Ohio State University, Fisher College of Business, honors students complete a survey course in the first quarter of enrollment.

The survey is designed to familiarize students with the university environment and introduce them to curricular requirements and honors opportunities in the business college and at the university. Students explore major and career interests in business through assignments, guest speakers, and in-class discussion. This course is taught by the students' academic advisor in the college, which allows for a supportive advising relationship to begin in the classroom and continue through one-on-one advising sessions throughout their college career. Students have the opportunity to develop a sense of community through interactions with business faculty members, staff, and students. Course evaluations and informal feedback from students indicate increased knowledge of career resources and better understanding of curricular requirements and honors opportunities. The model for this seminar course was adapted from Virginia Gordon's (1983) undecided honors freshmen course.

Conclusion

High-ability business students are an enjoyable and challenging population with whom to work. These students come to college full of anticipation about their academic experience and with expectations that they will continue to be successful. For some students the increase in competition at the college level is met with increased ambition to succeed, but for others the changes create frustration. High ability students who choose to pursue business are not only faced with the expectation that they will excel academically, but they are also expected to enter the corporate fast track upon graduation. The current employment outlook data, in which com-

panies are reporting diminished hiring needs, adds to the stress levels of high-ability business students. These students benefit greatly from academic advisors who can provide a supportive environment and can help students define their needs as well as establish their goals for success.

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