FEATURES

University of Washington Transition School:

College Preparation and Teaching for Transformation

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Abstract: Transition School is a Special School like no other—seventh- or eighth-grade students prepare not only for their 1st year of college in one classroom for one academic year but they also transform themselves from middle schoolers to scholars. This article will detail their curriculum, support structures, and exceptional ways in which their social and emotional well-being is addressed and monitored throughout their rapid acceleration experience. The article concludes with an overview of the research that supports this unusual and rather unique educational experience.

Keywords: acceleration, middle school, curriculum, social/emotional needs, special school

The University of Washington's (UW) Robinson Center for Young Scholars specializes in challenge. Our students, ranging from kindergartners in our Saturday Enrichment Program all the way up to high school–age UW Academy students, share in an academic experience that is challenging in its depth, pace, and rigor. This experience is also challenging in that it is in many ways a *transition*—from one way of thinking to another, from one way of approaching problems to another, and from one way of working with peers to another. This is best exemplified by the Robinson Center's Transition School (TS) and Early Entrance Program (EEP). As one TS student once put it, TS "taught me how to think."

The TS is the first step toward Early Entrance into the UW. The EEP was founded 35 years ago to allow qualified younger students (before age 15) to skip high school and move directly into the University. The program was intended to serve the needs of students ready and willing to move more quickly and more deeply in their learning, even beyond secondary gifted programs available in the region. Because of the young age of these students, a 1-year TS was established as an intensive "college prep" program before the students were admitted into EEP. The TS is housed on the UW campus, and so in many respects, the students begin their "University" experience with TS.

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Who Becomes an EEPer?

Students enter TS usually after their eighth-grade year, although we sometimes admit students who have only completed seventh grade. The criteria for entrance into the TS are comprehensive and include the following:

- American College Testing (ACT) scores in the 85th percentile or above in English, math, and reading
- Two years of transcripts that show a consistent level of excellence
- A birth date that indicates the student will not yet be 15 as of the start date of TS
- U.S. citizenship or permanent resident status

Successful applicants have strong ACT scores, usually straight A's, and enthusiastic teacher recommendations, which have traditionally been confidential phone conversations. At the final stage in the process, candidates and their parents or guardians spend the day at TS, observing classes, talking with students and teachers, and being interviewed by an admissions team. The admissions team includes administrators, counselors, and faculty from the Robinson Center, and admissions staff from the UW. Last year, more than 60 students applied to TS, and 17 students entered as our new class in the fall of 2012.

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The TS Curriculum and Its Goals

The curriculum of the TS has changed over the years, but currently students take English, history, physics, and precalculus for the first two quarters. In the second quarter, they also add ethics to their curriculum. In the third quarter, physics is replaced with one university class and a service-learning requirement that for the first time this year will be connected to their spring ethics course. The TS classes are designed to prepare these young students for college, and therefore, not only is the content accelerated but also the humanities are structured to teach discourse and argument within the disciplines.

The TS curriculum is designed not to replace the high school curriculum but instead to emphasize the precise skills and knowledge necessary to do well at the UW. Our faculty is experienced in teaching at the University, and knows what it takes for a student to succeed in a university environment. Students need not only to develop strong academic stills but also organizational and scholarly skills. By midpoint of the TS year, students should be able to

- *Read primary source materials and texts across genres with understanding and depth.* One of the areas considered most problematic for young students is accessing and understanding complex, layered, and nuanced reading material along with the ability to write essays that are analytical and developed. It has been our belief that there is no reason that younger (age 13 or 14) students cannot access this material in meaningful ways. It is not simply life experience or cognitive development that affects the level of understanding but it is also an awareness of audience, of rhetoric and language. At the university, students will not simply be asked to describe a text and its arguments but they will also be asked to engage with the text methodologically, seeing it through a lens mediated by culture, social power, and/or gender. Through a practice-based approach, we bring our students into immediate contact with complex material and help them learn how to approach the text so as to "practice" the discipline.
- *Write for different audiences with clarity, organization, and nuance.* Whether it is early medieval history or the ethics of Kant, our students grapple with complex ideas and arguments, learning how to participate in the larger "conversations" of the disciplines, each one with its own specific approach. In class, our instructors model this approach and the students learn how to engage in the academic conversation; later, in their essays, our students develop their own lines of inquiry as scholars of history, ethics, or English. In this way, they are prepared for what they will face as freshmen at the University. Once again, we are creating in the TS classroom a "college" atmosphere that demands a new way of thinking, of reading, and of writing.
- *Conduct research effectively.* Students for whom the Internet was an easy potpourri of downloadable informational paragraphs begin to explore the wider world of academic research, from learning how to conduct a thorough search on the web to wandering the shelves at the University's libraries. Most importantly, they learn how to ask the right questions that will generate research. They come to understand that research is not a discrete set of tasks but rather an open-ended process that requires persistence, intellectual curiosity, and creativity.
- *Conduct a lab, collect data, and write a lab report.* The TS physics class introduces students not only to introductory principles of physics but also to the best practices of a lab science. Students engage in a lab weekly, for which they write a pre-lab and lab report. This is something most students get in high school; our students gain access to the state-of-the-art facilities of the UW, taught by two professors emeritus in physics. They learn how to generate questions, apply formulae, and work through difficult problems.
- *Keep up with a heavy workload via use of a planner and other organizational tools, meeting all deadlines.* Gifted students often have been able to live by their wits in school, with no need to write down notes, deadlines, or divide up their assignments; all were very doable by just doing. The workload of TS, however, is sufficiently heavy and difficult so that it is impossible for any student to get past the 3rd week of the fall quarter without adopting at least a few organizational strategies. We work on these strategies with students in weekly 30-min tutorials, and it is often during these sessions that we talk about specific strategies. Certainly, we allow for individuality; the note-taking system that works for one student will not work for another. But in most cases, students come in with no note-taking strategies at all and so it is the role of the instructors, and tutorial, to provide these keys to success.
- *Participate frequently and effectively in class discussions.* Our goal here is not to just partake of call-and-response between teacher and student but to encourage actual discussion among students; they are specifically encouraged to respond to each other's points and engage in the exchange of ideas. Often gifted students are averse to risk, especially the risk of not seeming quite so "gifted"; some of them are also perfectionists who wait until they have completely thought through a "perfect" answer before raising their hand. Both of these habits get in the way of truly learning, and also get in the way of a dynamic and diverse discussion.
- *Work collegially and collaboratively with fellow students.* Often students enter our program allergic to group work and with a well-developed taste for competition. Quickly they learn that group work in TS is essential to their academic success not only in peer writing groups but also in physics review sessions. The fact that they are among a group of students who are highly motivated and who have

chosen to come to TS is a major help in this. We actively discourage competition; grades are private, and assessment is all about personal best.

- *Advocate for oneself with faculty and staff in an effective and mature manner.* This is all about becoming an independent, assertive scholar and taking responsibility for one's own learning. Part of this independence comes about by making sure parents understand they must now be in the backseat. Students must learn how to get the help they need, to approach faculty with questions, to seek out advice, and to plan their coursework. We encourage this advocacy throughout the TS year by practicing these skills (regular meetings with faculty, etc.) and through working with parents, to help them to understand their new role.

These are not easy steps for many students to take. We understand that when students enter our classroom in late September, they may not have many of these skills in place. Some students will be resistant to the use of a planner; others find it difficult to approach an instructor for help outside of class. Many students struggle with participating effectively because they have come from the world of the eighth grade, a world that they mastered with ease, without having to develop the substantive study skills so important later in life. And while it is one thing to persuade a student that precalculus is a valuable subject to learn, it is an entirely different matter to persuade that same student that taking detailed notes in class is essential to academic success. It is therefore very important that applicants to the program demonstrate, in their interview, a capacity to self-reflect and change behaviors that have become counterproductive.

One of the most significant reasons students opt for TS/Early Entrance is that they feel themselves ready to experience a more independent, mature learning environment. In our study of Running Start (Halvorsen, Noble, Robinson, & Sisko, 2000), many students cited this longing for independence as an incentive to join that program. Even with our "one-room schoolhouse" of TS, we provide students with the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning. They are on an open campus, free to come and go when not in class, and as we move through the year, their TS coursework becomes gradually less scaffolded and more open-ended, much like college-level work. In fact, it could be said that TS in no way mirrors high school but rather *is* college, in both the high-level content of the coursework and in the demands placed on the student as a self-directed scholar. The key ways in which TS differs from college are in the matters of choice and intervention: Students cannot choose their TS classes, and when a student is struggling, we provide supports through interventions.

Supports and Interventions

One of the key differences between TS and the University is that we have established intervention procedures for students who are struggling, and these interventions kick in at an early stage. Whereas at the University, a student must be in dire straits before any action might be taken, if at all; at TS, we have implemented a careful and layered set of steps to help students move in the right direction once they have been identified as struggling because of the steep trajectory between the eighth-grade experience and college-level work. While most students achieve all of the benchmarks throughout the year that show adequate progress, two or three students (out of a class of 16) might require more help.

The first stage is known as Focus. Once the TS faculty has made the decision that the student is not making good progress, they determine as a group the requirements of Focus for that particular student. For example, if students seem to be having difficulty with being prepared for exams, it might be required that they turn in lecture notes for their instructors to review. Usually, it is required that students meet with individual instructors weekly. One of the most important aspects of Focus is that although the faculty structures it carefully, it needs to be fulfilled by student initiative. The student must make all of the appointments; come to the meetings with an agenda, questions, and problems; and must carry out all requirements with little or no reminders. This is all part of developing a sense of responsibility that is essential to do well at the University. The Focus period may last anywhere from 2 to 4 weeks. At the end of that time, the faculty meets again to discuss and assess progress.

Parents are only included in this insofar as the Principal of TS notifies them of the decision for Focus and the requirements. All of the tasks are for the student to carry out. This can be very difficult for parents who are accustomed to playing a more direct role in their child's education, but in this case, TS is helping them become "college" parents. Parents are transitioning too.

If a student does not show progress after being on Focus, we then move to Probation. At this point, the student and family need to be thinking about whether TS is the optimal educational match. The TS faculty considers requirements (which again usually include frequent one-on-one meetings with faculty, turning in drafts of assignments, and other actions) but which also include specific benchmarks that must be achieved within 3 to 4 weeks (e.g., obtaining 70% on a math test or getting an 85% on the English final exam). The goal here is finally to decide whether TS is really the right fit. Sometimes students are able to achieve these benchmarks; other times it is the decision of the faculty that the student must return to secondary school. This is never an easy decision; we do everything we can to help a student find his or her way into the University. But it is also our responsibility to make sure that the student has every chance of being successful.

What we have found with this process is that, first of all, its transparency is comforting to students who are already under a certain amount of stress. Second, while it puts the burden of responsibility on the student, it also involves the entire faculty as true partners in the student's trajectory toward the

University. What we hope is that the student internalizes the behaviors and attitudes promoted in this intervention, so that he or she will continue to make progress without the continued structure of Focus or Probation. This is all part of the transition from an excellent middle school student to an independent, mature college scholar.

Facilitating the Transition From TS to EEP

By the start of winter quarter, students have for the most part acclimated to the rigors of TS. It is time to look ahead to the coming fall when those students who have successfully completed TS will become fully matriculated freshmen at the UW. In the Robinson Center vernacular, students will then be known as EEP students or EEPers. This transition—from TSer to EEPer—is guided by EEP and UW Academy staff (UW Academy is another Robinson Center program for students who leave high school after 10th grade and enter as UW Honors students and UW Academy students) and is organized into several steps, each building on the last. In line with the TS curriculum and instructional model, transition programming focuses on supporting both the socioemotional and academic facets of students' development. It is important to note that in the TS-to-EEP transition programming, academic development is framed in terms of honing the more procedural skills and knowledge, as opposed to intellectual capacities, that it takes to be a successful university student (e.g., navigating the quarterly course time schedule).

Beginning in the winter quarter of their TS year, students start the pre-EEP component of the programming meant to facilitate their transition to the UW as EEPers. Students take *UW 101*, a weekly seminar led by the Robinson Center Academic Counselor, a key resource, teacher, and advocate for students in their first several years at the UW. The Robinson Center Academic Counselor assists EEP and UW Academy students as they plan their quarterly and yearly courses, explore majors, and approach experiential learning opportunities, such as research, international study, and leadership projects. Other EEP and Academy staff as well as staff members from the UW at large participate in *UW 101* with the goal of introducing TSers to key people at the Robinson Center and across the university who are available to support them in their transition to becoming EEPer and throughout their time at the UW. The curriculum of *UW 101* focuses in part on the procedural aspects of the TS-to-EEP transition, such as filling out the UW freshman application and learning the nuts and bolts of the course registration system. Students also receive group and individual academic advising regarding the strategic selection of their spring quarter UW course.

A second focus of the *UW 101* curriculum is supporting the complex socioemotional aspects of the transition to becoming a fully matriculated UW freshman. This support is offered by Robinson Center staff, who broach topics such as health and wellness while introducing students to health and wellness resources on campus, and by older EEPers, whose mentorship of TSers is key to their successful social transition. A panel of older EEPers speaks to TS students about what it is like to be an EEPer, offering tips for success and advice for navigating the potentially tricky aspects of being a young college student. The potential pitfalls of being younger than the typical college student become salient for TSers as they being to imagine themselves as university freshmen. A common question posed by TSers to EEPers is as follows: "Do other UW students treat EEPers differently because we are young?" The typical answer from the EEP students usually assuages this concern: "If you don't tell people how old you are, they probably won't know. And if they do know, they don't care!"

The spring quarter pre-EEP programming for TSers mainly comprises individualized and group academic advising with the Robinson Center academic advising team to help students plan their fall quarter course schedules in line with their academic goals and interests. During these meetings, strategies for further honing study skills, advocating for oneself with UW faculty and staff, and other academic proficiencies are also addressed. At the conclusion of their TS year, TSers "graduate" to the EEP, at which point they join 1st-year students in the UW Academy early university entrance program to experience transition programming specifically designed by EEP and UW Academy staff to meet these students' unique developmental and academic needs.

Transition programming for 1st-year EEP and UW Academy students includes academic counseling support throughout the year, a winter quarter seminar focused on making the most of university and long-term planning, and a Bridge Program over the summer before students' first quarter. All of this serves to further introduce students to UW resources and to facilitate community building among the 1st-year students from both programs and between 1st-year students and older EEP and Academy students who act as mentors for their younger peers.

Transition programming for TS students is under constant evaluation; changes are made in response to the evolving needs of the student community. For example, EEP students plan to develop a TS mentorship program beginning in the winter of 2013; this mentorship element will then be incorporated by EEP and Academy staff into pre-EEP programming as a means to support students' holistic development as scholars.

Do EEPers Do Well?

The most extensive review of the research about the Robinson Center early university entrance programs is included in Noble and Childers' (2009) article titled, "Swimming in Deep Waters." Most of the early studies were completed by Janos and Robinson (1985); Janos, Robinson, and Lunneborg (1989); and Janos, Sanfilippo, and Robinson (1986), and numerous studies were conducted by Noble and her colleagues at the Robinson Center. The majority of early studies compared the early entrance students who entered the UW with students of college age with similar academic talents (National Merit Finalists),

and students who they called "Regulars"—those who entered as freshman after their senior year. In most of the comparison studies, the researchers found that the early entrance students had no statistically significant differences in social well-being, academic achievement, or attitudes toward school. In other words, they were as socially and educationally adjusted as other students. They did find, however, that the early entrance students had slightly higher grade point averages (GPAs) as a group than the "regular" students.

Findings from questionnaire- and interview-based qualitative studies that explored the experience of early entrance students (Noble & Childers, 2008; Noble & Drummond, 1992) suggested that the vast majority of students were pleased with the amount of acceleration they received, their decision to attend college early, and with their experiences in the EEP. EEP students interviewed by Noble and Drummond (1992) stated that they did not miss having a typical high school experience; the researchers concluded that Early Entrance was a more optimal match for educational placement for EEPers than high school would have offered.

One of the most important features of the TS is the cohort model. The 16 students each year are supported by the development of strong and positive social relationships among the cohort. The Robinson Center has systems in place to promote bonding and collegiality for students to develop camaraderie and emotional support. The year begins and ends with a camping trip that enhances relationships among students and between students and staff. TS students have teaching assistants who were once in the TS. These students take leadership roles to help their younger peers become successful early entrance students.

TS, as unique as it is at the UW, can be replicable. For more information about the components of the TS and EEP, please feel free to contact us at the Robinson Center or peruse our website at https://depts.washington.edu/cscy/

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Bios

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