Emporia State University
Gifted Program Focus Group
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The Emporia Gifted Program Focus Group provided information, comments and discussion from program alumni working as gifted facilitators and their respective administrators to assess and improve program effectiveness to prepare practitioners in Kansas. The Focus Group measured program viability for degree coursework completed by students who graduated between 2006 and 2009.

Description

In Fall 2005, the ESU Gifted Program Focus Group was conducted electronically through email with five gifted program graduates employed in Kansas public schools and their respective supervisors using a modified the previous focus group survey to establish continuity in the data collection process. The 2009 Gifted Program Focus Group used the same format and further amended the 2005 Alumni Individual Survey to add nine advisement questions as Part III in the 2009 Alumni Individual Survey:

17. Application to ESU graduate school and submission of admission materials for the gifted program MS in Special Education-Gifted;
18. Department notification of admittance, degree candidacy status, Graduate Essay Examination and Comprehensive Examinations
19. Assistance with state requirements for waiver, provisional and/or full endorsement
20. Enrollment in required and elective gifted program degree coursework
21. Encouragement to participate in professional development experiences such as mini-workshops, on-site visits and conferences
22. Recommendations for scholarships and job interviews
23. Consultation about professional issues and concerns in the field of gifted education
24. Assistance with gifted program degree plan analysis and graduation requirements
25. Overall availability and expertise of gifted program advisement

The 2009 Gifted Program Focus Group included five gifted program alumni who graduated with an MS degree in Special Education-Gifted within the past five years from all compass points of Kansas in urban, suburban and rural settings. The Alumni Individual Survey (attached) consisted of 78 items in seven parts: I Demographics, II Course Delivery Methods, III Gifted Program Advisement, IV KSDE Standards Alignment and Technology Proficiency, V Developing Specific Competencies, VI Gifted Program Course Completion, and VII Open Response and Discussion.

The Administrator Individual Survey (attached) paralleled the Alumni Individual Survey in a simplified format with 42 items in four parts: I Demographics, II KSDE Standards
Alignment and Technology Proficiency, III Developing Specific Competencies, and IV Open Response and Discussion.

**Procedure**

The process began in Fall 2009 when the Gifted Program Director contacted five alumni who graduated between 2006 and 2009 and were employed in Kansas schools varying in size and location. Each alumna identified her supervising administrator who agreed to participate in the parallel Administrator Focus Group. To preserve anonymity, one of the alumni agreed to function as the coordinator to communicate with Gifted Focus Group participants. The Gifted Program Director emailed the Focus Group Alumni Individual Survey to the Alumni Focus Group coordinator who then emailed it to five alumni participants. The alumni coordinator received 100% return within approximately one week.

The Alumni Focus Group coordinator then emailed respondents their collective anonymous open-ended comments to the Gifted Program Director who categorized and summarized them. The Gifted Program Director then returned them to the Alumni Focus Group coordinator to disseminate for a simulated discussion with the request that participants read the summarized comments and respond to them in summary paragraph.

A similar procedure occurred with the Administrator Focus Group. The Gifted Program Director identified a coordinator for the Administrator Focus Group who then emailed the Administrator Individual Survey to the five administrators. The administrator coordinator received a 100% return within approximately one week. The coordinator then emailed categorized summary comments to the Administrator Focus Group coordinator who emailed the compilation to the five administrators for a simulated discussion.

**Results**

*Part I Alumni Survey Demographics*

The Alumni Focus group consisted of a total of five female participants (Q1) with 2 alumnae in the 31-35 age range, 2 alumnae in the 36 to 44 age range group, and 1 alumnae over 45 years (Q2). Five respondents reported Caucasian ethnicity (Q3). Four worked full-time, and one worked less than full time (Q4). Four had positions at the middle school level, and 1 worked at the high school level (Q5). One gifted facilitator worked in a school of 250-499 students, 3 worked in schools of 750-999 students, and 1 worked in a school of 1000 or more students (Q6). All possessed a master’s degree in Special Educator-Gifted from ESU (Q7), and one alumna held an additional graduate degree in another field (Q8). All five gifted facilitators completed 24-36 hours of gifted program courses at ESU (Q9). Three alumnae indicated awareness of current policy of ESU non degree graduate hours applied toward a master’s degree, and two lacked did not know this (Q10). All knew ESU now offers the program entirely online (Q11).

*Part I Administrator Survey Demographics*
The Administrator Focus Group consisted of four males and one female (Q1). The age range varied with one administrator in the 36-40 age range; two administrators in the 41-45 age range; one administrator in the 46-50 category; and one participant over 50 years of age (Q2). All five administrators indicated Caucasian ethnicity (Q3). Two administrators had roles as the building principal; two administrators functioned as assistant/associate principals; and one administrator was a district superintendent (Q4). Three administrators worked at the middle school level; one respondent at the high school level; and one indicated other which would be the elementary level (Q5). The schools ranged from under 250 with one administrator; 500-749 with one respondent; 750-999 with one administrator; and over 1000 with two respondents (Q6). Four administrators held a master’s degree, and one respondent had an earned doctorate (Q7). None of the administrators had coursework in gifted education (Q8, Q9). One administrator supervised the gifted facilitator one to three years; one administrator supervised the gifted facilitator four to six years; one administrator indicated seven to nine years of experience supervising the gifted facilitator; and one supervised the gifted facilitator more than ten years.

**Part II Alumni Course Delivery Methods**

When asked to rate the course delivery method on a Likert scale with 1 as very low and 5 as very high, program alumni preferred Internet (Q13) which received the highest averaged score. Telnet (Q12) scored 3.44, and Combined Internet and 2 weekends/semester (Q15) scored 2.2. Weekend college defined as 4 weekends/semester on campus (Q14) received a 2.0 score. The lowest score was weekly meetings on campus (Q16).

Analysis of individual scores indicated two participants would not enroll in weekend college coursework: two alumni did not prefer this delivery; and one respondent had no preference (Q14). One respondent would not enroll in combination coursework; three did not prefer this method; and one alumnus had no preference (Q15). Four respondents would not enroll in weekly campus classes, and one alumnus had no preference (Q16).

*Note.* The gifted program began offering all coursework online in the Fall 2004 semester, and only two of the five alumni began coursework prior to Fall 2004.

**Part III Gifted Program Advisement**

Nine questions measured the alumni’s experience with gifted program advisement on a five point Likert scale with one as very low and 5 as very high. The averaged scores ranged from 4.6 for 1 item to 5.0 for 5 items. Alumni high rated five areas as 5.0: advisement effectiveness of the application to the graduate school and admission to the gifted program (Q17), department notification of admission, degree candidacy, Graduate Essay Exam and the Comprehensive Exam (Q18), advisement on state requirements for waiver, provisional endorsement, and full endorsement (Q19), and enrollment in required and elective degree coursework (Q20), and overall availability and expertise of gifted program advisement (Q25).
Three areas scored 4.8: recommendations for scholarships and job interviews (Q22), consultation about professional issues and concerns received a 4.8 score (Q23); assistance with gifted program degree plan analysis and graduate requirements (Q24). One area received a 4.6 rating: encouragement to participate in professional development experiences such as mini-workshops, on-site visits, and conference (Q21) scored a 4.6. Alumni evaluated all nine areas at 4.6 or higher.

Part IV Alumni KSDE Standards Alignment and Technology Proficiency

Alumni answered 14 questions about how well the program coursework and delivery methods prepared them as gifted facilitator when aligned with KSDE standards and technology proficiency. Participants selected ratings on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 as very low and 5 as very high. The score averages for 8 items ranged from 4.2 to 4.8. The highest scores rated Standard 2, understanding learner diversity (Q27), and Standard 8, professionalism and ethics (Q33). Alumni evaluated Standard 1, preparation in foundations (Q26), and Standard 5, understanding and arranging learning environments (Q30), at 4.6. Standard 6, preparation to understand and provide experience in problem-solving, critical and creative thinking, social interaction, leadership, and service (Q31) and Standard 7, communication and collaboration (Q32) received 4.4 scores. Standard 3, understanding and using multiple assessment methods (Q28), received a 4.5 score. The lowest averaged scores was Standard 4, understanding and applying curriculum to structure advanced and expanded state and local curriculum (Q29). Alumni rated their preparation in all KSDE Standards for Educators of the Gifted at a high to very high averaged score.

Six technology proficiencies items score averages scored ranged 4.2 to 4.4. The highest averaged score of 4.4 included three areas: using the Internet (Q33), using integrating technology with discipline-specific teaching (Q34), and using technology to develop materials related to the discipline (Q37). The lowest three scores were: using discipline-specific software (Q36); using discipline-specific specialized equipment (Q38); and verbalizing and modeling legal and ethical uses of technology (39).

Part II Administrator KSDE Standards Alignment and Technology Proficiency

Administrators answered the same KSDE Standards and Technology Proficiency items as the alumni with scores ranging from 4.0 to 4.8. The highest score average was Standard 8, professionalism and ethics (Q18). Administrators scored Standard 6, communication and collaboration (Q16), as 4.6. They scored five areas as 4.4: Standard 1, foundations (Q11); Standard 2 diverse learners (Q12); Standard 3, multiple assessment methods (Q13); and Standard 4, understanding and applying curriculum to structure advanced and expanded state and local curriculum (Q14); and Standard 5 understanding and arranging learning environments (Q15). The lowest area measured Standard 7, communication and collaboration understanding and skills (Q17), as 4.0. Administrators evaluated the preparation of gifted facilitators at a high to very high level of averaged scores for all KSDE Standards for Educators of the Gifted.
The Technology Proficiency score averages ranged from 4.0 to 4.6. The highest scores were using the Internet (Q20) and verbalizing and modeling legal and ethical use of technology (Q22). Administrators scored using discipline-specific software (Q21) as 4.4 and using discipline-specific equipment (Q23) as 4.2. The two lowest scores of 4.0 were integrating technology with discipline-specific teaching (Q19) and using technology to develop discipline-specific materials (Q22).

Part V Alumni Developing Specific Competencies

Gifted Program alumni evaluated 15 items to develop specific competencies on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 as very low and 5 as very high. The score averages ranged from 3.6 to 4.8. The three highest areas scored at 4.8 were: understanding growth and development (Q45), identifying socio-emotional needs (Q47), and stimulating independent learning of the gifted (Q48). Alumni evaluated cultural diversity (Q46) and individualizing instruction (Q49) at a 4.6; higher order thinking skills (Q40) and collaboration (Q50) at 4.4; developing technology skills (Q41) and recommended practices (Q54) at 4.2; developing creativity (Q42) and classroom management (Q52) at 4.0; and working with community (Q44), integrating library and media resources into instruction (Q51), and identification systems (Q53) as 3.8. The lowest rated specific competency was developing IEPs (Q43) at 3.6. Overall, 73% of the items received score averages in the high to very high range with 27% in the neutral to high range.

Part III Administrator Developing Specific Competencies

Administrators answered the same 15 items as the alumni for specific competencies with score averages ranging from 4.0 to 4.8. The highest two areas with 4.8 scores measured higher order thinking skills (Q25) and developing creativity (Q27). Administrators rated developing IEPs (Q28) at 4.6; growth and development (Q30), independent learning (Q33), individualizing instruction (Q34), and recommended practices (Q39) at 4.4; identification systems (Q38) at 4.3; and developing technology skills (Q26), cultural diversity (Q31), socio-emotional needs (Q32), and collaboration (Q35) at 4.2. The lowest scored areas at 4.0 measured working with community (Q26), integrating library and media resources into instruction (36), and classroom management (Q37). All 14 areas received score averages at the high to very high levels.

Part VI Alumni Gifted Program Course Completion A, B & [C]

In Part A, all alumni indicated successful completion of all seven gifted program courses with a B grade or higher (Q55-59), and all respondents completed all 4 core courses at a B grade or higher with the exception of one not applicable response in ER752 Analysis of Research.

In Part B, alumni selected Likert ratings of 1 as very low and 5 as very high for the degree of benefit from the nine program and core coursework for personal growth and/or teaching experience. The score averages ranged with from 3.3 to 5.0. The highest scores were PY850 Characteristics of Individuals with Gifts and Talents (Q64) and SD851
Education of Individuals with Gifts and Talents (Q65). SD852 Social and Emotional Adjustment of Individuals with Gifts & Talents (Q66) received a 4.8 score. SD855/857 Practicum I: Elementary or Secondary (Q67) and SD856/858 Practicum II: Elementary or Secondary (Q68) scored 4.2, and PY812 Individual Assessment scored 4.0. Core coursework in SD851 Seminar in Behavior Modification (Q71) scored 3.8; SD800 Consultation and Collaboration (Q69) scored 3.4; and ER752 Analysis of Research scored the lowest at 3.3.

Gifted Program alumni rated their overall preparation (Q73) at score average of 4.4. They evaluated the responsiveness of professors during the program (Q74) and approachability of professors as mentors after the program (Q75) at a score average of 48.

Note. The PY864 Creative Teaching and Learning course was inadvertently omitted in the 2005 and 2009 Focus Groups in the Alumni Individual Survey and will be added to the next Focus Group.

Part VII Alumni Open Response and Discussion

All five alumni commented in all three of the three open response questions addressing: (a) perceived strengths, (b) suggestions to improve the program, and (c) additional comments. The alumni then received a compilation of their comments for a stimulated discussion.

All five graduates found three common areas of perceived strengths: (a) instructors and ESU staff, (b) online delivery, and (c) program coursework. The alumni appreciated responsive advisement, availability, online delivery competence, and individual attention provided by the program faculty. Alumni appreciated the functionality of library, bookstore, and distance education staff to support their learning efforts. They all mentioned the flexibility and convenience of the online program in order to complete the degree in busy lives and schedules. Two respondents considered the discussion forum essential to learning and networking with colleagues. The program coursework stimulated thought-provoking, insightful comments and provided the sense of community that helped them avoid isolation. They could read comments at their convenience for deeper thinking. The program coursework assignments were practical, presented real-world issues, and rigorous. Alumni expressed appreciation for faculty availability and mentoring during the program which continued after their graduation.

Four alumni recommended areas to improve: more interaction with the instructor and between students (1 comment); increased emphasis on differentiation methods with secondary level students (1 comment); more IEP and instructional goal writing training (1 comment); and increased technology (1 comment). One graduate found the experience better than anticipated and had no suggestions for improvement.

The “Other comments” areas described the program as very positive, and one alumnae had no response. One graduate recommended the program over available programs because of the “communication and customer service to current and potential students.”
In the simulated discussion, one respondent commented, “Dr. Phelps was an amazing support system. I got to meet her at the gifted conference. I also loved blackboard. I liked interacting with my peers. I was given many useful ideas for my classroom through networking.” Another stated, “The people of Emporia State, the online courses and the course content were brought up in each response. Either great minds just think alike or these are obvious strengths of the program.”

**Part VI Administration Open Response and Discussion**

The Administrator Focus Group mentioned the following special strengths: working effectively with diverse gifted learners (4 respondents); individualizing instruction (2 respondents); and developing higher order thinking skills; creativity (2 respondents); and stimulating autonomous learning (1 respondent). One administered viewed the program gave the supervised teacher “an excellent perspective of what gifted education should be. Students are prepared to hit the ground running.” Another stated, “Program completers are well versed and knowledgeable in gifted teaching techniques.”

Areas to improve included working more closely with general education teachers to develop differentiated lessons (2 respondents), incorporating technology into the curriculum (1 respondent); and breaking broad and general concepts down into how they look in the gifted classroom (1 respondent). One administrator had no response, and another stated, “The program is really effective. I don’t have any changes I would like to see.” Other comments primarily briefly echoed appreciation for an effective program.

In the simulated discussion, four administrators provided comments which included: agreement that the program produced “well rounded gifted facilitators” who could “adapt their instruction to a diverse population of students with varying learning styles.” One administrator stated, “our teachers[s’] preparation at ESU was excellent and enabled them to be successful in the gifted classroom.” A second administrator agreed with the individual comment for more technology training to develop and deliver differentiated instruction. They also agreed on the need for further training in differentiated instruction in gifted and regular education classrooms. One administrator provided no summary discussion response.

**Conclusion**

Overall, both alumni and administrators commented on the ESU Gifted Program effectiveness. Alumni viewed program faculty positively, provided overwhelming support for online course work, and found program coursework well-suited to their success. Consensus on program strength indicated the ability to work effectively with diverse gifted learners. However, although alumni needed additional preparation in IEP, secondary methods, critical thinking and creativity (1 respondent for each area), the administrators did not mention these areas for improvement. Both alumni and administrators agreed strongly on the need for additional technology training and would like additional differentiation instruction preparation for the gifted and regular education
classroom. While graduates appreciated the program delivery flexibility, the direct contact between the instructor and teachers and between themselves was essential to their overall satisfaction. Administrator expressed gratitude for effective preparation and contributed constructive comments to make a great program even better. The individual alumni surveys consistently showed very high ratings for gifted program coursework. They rated core program coursework lower, and two individual surveys gave a very low rating to two of the core classes, SD800 Consultation and Collaboration and ER752 Analysis of Research, with the latter receiving the lowest averaged score. Alumni gave strong overall approval to program faculty for availability during the program and approachability after the program.

**Recommendations**

In both the 2005 and 2009 Gifted Program Focus Groups, similar results call for increased preparation in technology. At least one respondent in both reports specified more IEP training. Both reports indicate the need for more applicable core program coursework. The 2009 Focus Group indicates additional preparation in differentiated instruction from both administrators and alumni.

Since the 2005 report, the Gifted Program Director has attended annual technology training events at Emporia State University and during national gifted conferences. The challenge is to incorporate additional technology training without overwhelming digital natives in the program. An additional need is to continue to provide professional networking experiences despite steep program growth since 2008 without additional resources. The Gifted Program Director recommends the addition of advanced curriculum coursework, skill-based training in goal and IEP writing, and a centralized repository of individualized instructional materials that integrate technology.