

Gifted University Students: Development and Evaluation of a Counseling Program

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We developed, delivered, and evaluated a unique group counseling program for underperforming, gifted university students. Aligned with developmental and contextual models of giftedness, the program was designed to achieve four overarching goals using eight counseling themes relevant to academic success as identified in the literature or best practices. We evaluated the program using interviews with the participating students ($N = 8$), a questionnaire, and reflection among the counselors who delivered the program. Findings and recommendations for developing counseling programs for gifted students are presented.

Keywords: college counselors, gifted students, transition to higher education, counseling program development, counseling program evaluation

The transition to higher education is a time of multiple challenges, as students not only need to adjust to a new educational context, but also need to make new friends, develop new study skills, learn to live independently, and plan their time (Parker et al., 2006). Educators generally do not perceive gifted students as being “at risk,” and gifted students are therefore not often offered additional support in educational settings (Ritchotte et al., 2014). However, some gifted students are underachieving or performing below expectation, despite the ability to achieve strong academic results (Reis & McCoach, 2000). During compulsory education, the percentage of gifted underachievers has been estimated to be between a tenth and a quarter of gifted students, depending on the study (White et al., 2018). Although there has not been a study investigating the share of underachieving gifted students in the university context, a long-term longitudinal study in the Flemish context found that educational delay among these students increased dramatically when they transitioned to higher education, with more than a third of gifted students (i.e., top 10% on a cognitive ability test) needing to repeat a year or more within higher education (Ramos et al., 2019). This finding seems to indicate that these students experience particular difficulties in the higher education setting.

Literature Review

Different conceptual models and definitions of giftedness have been proposed in the literature (Verschueren et al., 2019). For this study, *giftedness* was defined

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as the ability to achieve excellence in one or more areas (e.g., artistic, social, intellectual; Heller, 1991). We focused on the area of intellectual giftedness, given the context of the university. Despite their differences, most models are developmental and contextual in nature, meaning that they assert that an ability in a particular domain can gradually develop into talent, and the extent to which talent develops depends on contextual and personal influences (Gagné, 2004; Subotnik et al., 2011; Verschueren et al., 2019).

For our literature review, we used keywords such as “gifted,” “giftedness,” “talents,” “university,” “college,” “counseling,” and “underachievement” to search for literature in the Limo integrated search interface. Limo provides access to the physical collection and scientific publications of KU Leuven, the collection of LIBISnet libraries, and scientific articles from publishers such as Web of Science, ERIC, and APA PsycArticles.

We originally searched for literature studies of gifted university students from 2010 to 2020. However, because there are only a few studies on gifted university students in this period (Almukhambetova & Hernandez-Torrano, 2020; Conejeros-Solar & Gómez-Arízaga, 2015; Gómez-Arízaga & Conejeros-Solar, 2013; Hébert & Schreiber, 2010), we expanded our search to the period from 2000 to 2020 (Baslanti & McCoach, 2006; Hammond et al., 2007; Hébert & McBee, 2007; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Speirs Neumeister, 2004).

Given that some gifted students experience difficulties at the university, an important question to address is “Which factors may limit the performance of gifted university students?” In the following paragraphs, we briefly discuss several noncognitive personal characteristics and environmental conditions, in line with developmental and contextual models of giftedness, that are perceived in the literature as either hindering or facilitating factors for gifted university students. These factors may explain why these students experience difficulties, resulting in underachievement.

It is important to note this list is not exhaustive. Moreover, there are only a few studies on gifted university students (Almukhambetova & Hernandez-Torrano, 2020; Baslanti & McCoach, 2006; Conejeros-Solar & Gómez-Arízaga, 2015; Gómez-Arízaga & Conejeros-Solar, 2013; Hammond et al., 2007; Hébert & McBee, 2007; Hébert & Schreiber, 2010; Ruban & Reis, 2006; Speirs Neumeister, 2004). These studies are often qualitative in nature and lack an average-ability reference group. Therefore, it is not clear to what extent the hindering factors are unique to gifted students or more generally prevalent in the general student population. Furthermore, the criteria to identify gifted students are often different in each study (e.g., SAT score, admission to honors program, identification during primary or secondary education), which makes comparison difficult.

Noncognitive Personal Characteristics

In line with developmental and contextual models about giftedness, the following noncognitive characteristics that can potentially limit the performance of gifted university students emerged from the literature: lack of self-regulating

skills; low academic self-concept; perfectionism and fear of failure; and, finally, low study motivation.

Lack of self-regulating skills. Self-regulating skills can be defined as “the processes and strategies that students use to initiate, direct, and monitor their learning” (Risemberg & Zimmerman, 1992, p. 98). They include skills such as time management and the ability to set learning goals, and they are significant predictors of gifted students’ performance (Ritchotte et al., 2014). Research on gifted university students confirms that these students often find it difficult to use self-regulating learning strategies at the start of their studies because of a lack of academic preparation in secondary education (Conejeros-Solar & Gómez-Arízaga, 2015).

Low academic self-concept. Academic self-concept is construed as an individual’s assessment of their own potential and skills with respect to learning (Blaas, 2014). Students with a higher academic self-concept generally deal more successfully with the new academic requirements of higher education and have a higher success rate in the 1st year of higher education (Mooney et al., 1991). Students develop their sense of academic self-concept in light of how they view their abilities compared with other students. Given the *big-fish-little-pond effect* (March, 1984), university can be seen as a large educational pond where social comparison processes, such as comparison of talents, qualities, or skills, can take place (Mendaglio, 2013). Because the ability level of the student group is often higher at the university than in secondary education, the transition to learning at the university may challenge the academic self-concept of gifted students, as they are suddenly comparing themselves with a higher ability group, and they are no longer easily the best academically. Although this process is frequently described in the literature on giftedness, as far as we know there is no longitudinal research that confirms this decline in academic self-concept in the transition to higher education.

Perfectionism and fear of failure. Another possible limiting factor for gifted students is *maladaptive perfectionism*, which entails holding high and unrealistic standards combined with self-criticism (Rice et al., 2006). This type of perfectionism can develop in gifted students because they are accustomed to achieving highly, and parents and other members of their community often have high expectations for them (Almukhambetova & Hernandez-Torrano, 2020). Maladaptive perfectionism can lead to stress, avoidance behaviors, and fear of failure (Tadik et al., 2017). These effects can hamper gifted students’ adjustment to university and undermine their academic performance (Almukhambetova & Hernandez-Torrano, 2020).

Low study motivation. A fourth factor refers to motivation, which is generally viewed as “the process of initiating and supporting goal-oriented activity” (Schunk et al., 2013, p. 5) and is often seen as a psychological process that arises from the interaction between environmental and individual factors (Ariani, 2016). Study motivation can be considered an internal process, denoting students’ willingness to put effort into their studies and the reasons

and motives behind this willingness. This internal state surfaces in observable engagement with or disengagement from academic tasks (De Brabander & Martens, 2014; Lavrijsen et al., 2021). Research shows that motivational processes above and beyond intelligence and personality (Lavrijsen et al., 2021) contribute to students' academic success (Ridgell & Lounsbury, 2004). Moreover, study motivation is associated with more perseverance, adaptation, and commitment in higher education (Vallerand & Bissonnette, 1992).

Underachieving gifted students have often been shown to have lower study motivation than their achieving peers (Baslanti & McCoach, 2006). Low study motivation among gifted students has been linked to an ill-fitting educational context in lower stages of education, in which the students were not sufficiently challenged (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). In the study of Gómez-Arízaga and Conejeros-Solar (2013), 12 college students participating in enrichment programs described study motivation as a strategy that helps them overcome difficulties and persevere in their studies. Students lacking study motivation would be less likely to develop important coping strategies to facilitate learning and success at the university.

Environmental Conditions

In line with developmental and contextual models about giftedness, and in addition to the personal characteristics, it emerged from the literature that social isolation and learning environment can limit the performance of gifted university students.

Social isolation. Swenson et al. (2008) stressed the importance of a social network for a good transition to higher education. First-year university students must first develop a social network before they can focus on academic and intellectual activities (Bauer & Liang, 2003). When gifted students cannot connect with students with similar intellectual abilities and interests, they feel socially isolated, which makes them less adaptable to their new university learning environment (Almukhambetova & Hernandez-Torrano, 2020).

Learning environment. The university environment is different from the learning environment in secondary education. Some gifted students find it difficult to adapt to the demands of the more impersonal university learning environment, characterized by less supervision, less guidance, and larger class groups. They often experience problems with greater academic independence in transition to higher education, where they have to take responsibility for their learning process (Mendaglio, 2013). In the study of Almukhambetova and Hernandez-Torrano (2020), some gifted students transitioning to higher education indicated that they lacked confidence and were unable to cope with the academic challenges, which caused them to underperform. As a result of this underperformance, their motivation for learning decreased, and they did not use their time efficiently. In light of these findings, the university learning environment can be seen as a potentially impeding factor for gifted students.

Purpose of the Present Study

The primary purpose of the present study was to develop a targeted counseling program for gifted university students, given the obstacles to their academic success that have been identified in the literature. It was uniquely developed for underperforming gifted university students because of the potential differences in their psychological processes and intellectual and social needs compared with nongifted students (Snyder & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2013), the common contextual considerations of underperforming gifted students, and the potential social benefits of grouping these students together (Peterson, 2003; Zaffrann & Colangelo, 1977).

Additionally, this study was aimed at evaluating the preconditions for participation, the approach, and the working methods of the program, as well as the effects experienced by the participating students. It therefore contributes to the research on evaluation and outcomes of counseling programs for gifted students, as little research has been published on these topics (Foley-Nicpon, 2002).

Method

Participants

Eight students participated in this study (five men, three women; $M = 21.5$ years of age, $SD = 2.29$). The participants were enrolled within different faculties of a Flemish university as follows: medicine ($n = 3$), philosophy ($n = 1$), bioscience engineering ($n = 1$), science ($n = 2$), and economics and business ($n = 1$).

Five students had been identified as gifted prior to the counseling program based on a psychological assessment administered by a qualified psychologist. However, a formal diagnosis was not necessary to participate. Students had to self-identify as academically gifted and enroll themselves in a counseling program called “Gifted Yet Struggling at the University?” This program was provided through the Study Advice department and was advertised to students via the department’s website, its Facebook page, emails, and screens in the library. The program was guided by two university counselors (the first and third authors).

Procedure

Development of the counseling program. The two university counselors set four overarching goals for the program, in addition to individual goals for every session. The choices that were made in the design contributed to reaching those overarching goals. The first overarching goal of the counseling program was for students to *communicate openly* with other gifted students about their own experiences and challenges stemming from their giftedness. In that way, gifted students could validate each other’s experiences and learn from each other, thereby promoting the *social and academic integration* of the partici-

pating students. As a second overarching goal, the program and discussion topics were aimed at facilitating an *acceptance* of the process of giftedness and an increase in *self-understanding* among the students. The third overarching goal of the program was to help gifted students develop *coping strategies* to deal with the possible disadvantages of giftedness through sharing their experiences, learning from the experiences of others, gaining self-insight through relevant theories, and setting individual goals based on these insights. The fourth overarching goal of the program was to *develop tools* for the students' developmental goals in their study process.

With the first overarching goal of open communication in mind, the counselors designed the program to be collaborative and participatory. Drawing on self-determination theory, which holds that people are motivated to change and grow when their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the gifted students were treated as equal partners in the development of the sessions. The program was cocreated by the counselors and the students.

First, the students were involved in selecting the content of the program. The counselors developed a guidebook consisting of eight themes for the guided group sessions (see Table 1). Themes were based on the insights of the literature review and best practices of other counseling programs for gifted students. The students were allowed to select, add, and remove themes from the guidebook based on their individual self-perceived needs. Additionally, students who already had experience with a specific theme could voluntarily share their experiences with their fellow students and facilitate an exercise, a discussion, or part of the session themselves. Second, the program format was designed to maximize interaction among the students. A series of in-person, guided group sessions was supplemented with an online chat group and study sessions.

The themes prepared by the counselors and chosen by the gifted students supported the second overarching goal of facilitating an acceptance of the

TABLE 1
Connections Between the Themes of the Counseling Sessions and Themes Identified in the Literature

Counseling Session Themes	Literature Themes
Theme 1: Academic and social integration	Social isolation Learning environment
Theme 2: Identity and self-concept	Academic self-concept
Theme 3: Executive functions	Self-regulation skills
Theme 4: Study skills	Self-regulation skills
Theme 5: Fear of failure	Perfectionism—Fear of failure
Theme 6: Perfectionism	Perfectionism—Fear of failure
Theme 7: Time management	Self-regulation skills
Theme 8: Perseverance and study motivation	Low study motivation Learning environment

process of giftedness as well as an increase in self-understanding among the students. The themes chosen by the students for the program included *academic and social integration* (Theme 1), *executive functions* (Theme 3), *study skills* (Theme 4), *fear of failure* (Theme 5), *perfectionism* (Theme 6), *time management* (Theme 7), and *perseverance and study motivation* (Theme 8). The only theme not selected by the students in this group was *identity and self-concept* (Theme 2). In the first session, discussions about “how to deal with giftedness” and “stereotypes of giftedness” were facilitated, following the recommendation of Colangelo and Peterson (2005) to start a counseling program for gifted individuals with nonthreatening and stimulating subjects. Different exercises and discussion questions were elaborated for each theme by the counselors. The exercises were structured using insights from cognitive behavioral therapy, which helps people learn how to identify and change detrimental thought patterns that have a negative influence on behavior and emotions.

The third overarching goal was to help the students develop coping strategies for possible disadvantages of giftedness. Toward this end, the counselors structured the counseling group sessions using the four-stage GROW (i.e., goal setting, reality checking, options, and will) model (Whitmore, 2009). Each counseling group session started with theory supporting the themes of the counseling session and the question of what the participants wanted to achieve around that theme (goal setting). Afterward, discussions or exercises were facilitated to discuss where the students were in relation to their goal (reality checking) and which possible solutions for their obstacles might allow them to reach their goal (options). After taking these reflective steps, the students were encouraged to form individual goals relating to the themes of each session. Parallel with the fourth step of the GROW model (will), the participants wrote out an action plan to work toward and achieve their goals. Through use of the GROW model, the theoretical insights from the session were translated into concrete, individualized strategies that the students could directly apply to their lives.

The fourth overarching goal of providing tools to aid the students in reaching their individual developmental goals was partially addressed by the individualized thematic action plans corresponding to the GROW model (will). Additionally, a group chat organized by the students gave them a means to keep in touch between sessions and remind each other of homework for the counseling program. This chat group also gave the counselors the opportunity to monitor the behavioral changes the students had proposed in their action plans during the sessions. The study sessions arranged by the students provided further accountability and support in reaching their goals.

Structurally, the counseling program consisted of five guided group sessions of 2 hours that took place on campus over a 3-month period. Each session was limited to 2 hours on account of practical arrangements as well as the diagnoses of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism among some of the participating students. The counselors held a prebrief-

ing moment before each group session and a debriefing moment after each session. During those moments, the counselors discussed the needs of the group and the contribution of the students. They continually adapted the content of the sessions based on insights from these briefing sessions—for example, by using the time to choose exercises and discussion topics from the guidebook to supplement the content given by the students—thereby taking characteristics of the particular group into account in designing the sessions.

Both the topics and content of the program were cocreated by and tailored to the participating students and may have varied somewhat depending on the particular group of students. Peterson (2007) pointed out the importance of referring the gifted student to an individual trajectory when discovering the need for intensive supervision. Because a limited number of sessions on different themes was not sufficient to solve deeper psychosocial problems among some participating students, a referral to other individual and more intensive programs was made if necessary.

Evaluation of the counseling program. For the purpose of evaluating the program, data were collected by means of a reflection between the two counselors, a questionnaire, and interviews with the students.

First, we created a questionnaire to gather data from the participants during the last session of the program. The questionnaire took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete and was intended to gauge the participants' appraisal of the characteristics of the counseling program (e.g., length, possibility for own contribution, composition of the group). The participants were also asked to what extent they felt their own behavior, well-being, and goal achievement had been impacted by the program. For each statement, the participants had to indicate their response on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In a second part of the questionnaire, the students could write down their opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of the program, thereby giving suggestions for improvement.

Second, immediately after the last session of the program, a reflection conversation of 90 minutes took place between the two counselors. Six clusters of topical questions developed to evaluate counseling processes (Engel, 2009) were used to guide this reflection. The topics included (a) the preconditions of the counseling process, such as the time and resources available; (b) an objective description of the counseling process, such as the time and form of counseling; (c) the students' appreciation of the process and its results, including the approach and working methods and mutual relationship between coach and student; (d) the extent to which the goal of the counseling had been achieved; (e) the effects on the organization; and (f) suggestions for improvements and follow-up actions.

Finally, semistructured interviews were conducted 3 months after the end of the program to assess its impact over a longer term. This evaluation was added because some behaviors may take some time to become new habits. The interview guide was constructed based on the same evaluation subjects of Engel (2009) that were used for the reflection between the counselors.

For example, the evaluation subject “coach and student mutual relationship” led to the question “How do you feel about your relationship as a student with the counselor?” Similarly, the evaluation subject “the extent to which the goal of the coaching has been achieved” led to the questions “In your opinion, has your behavior changed as a result of this program?” and “What has changed?” Some participants were questioned in more depth about their responses on the questionnaire. To ensure that proper questions were used, the questionnaire and interview guide were shared with experienced counselors and researchers for feedback. All students of the program were willing to participate in the interviews, which lasted an average of 45 minutes each. The data were pseudonymized, and the information concerning the participants was kept confidential at all times.

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed verbatim afterward. We divided the interview transcripts into different text fragments based on meaningfulness and content consistency. We then added codes, making the data set accessible for targeted analysis. A coding scheme was developed a priori based on the different evaluation topics from Engel’s (2009) evaluation framework. The coding scheme was constructed with five major themes: preconditions of the counseling process, description of the counseling process, appreciation of the students, goal attainment, and suggestions and next steps. These themes were then subdivided into several subthemes. Some text fragments were not assigned a code because they were not relevant to the research questions. Finally, within-case and cross-case analyses were conducted. A thematic approach was also used to analyze the notes of the reflection between the counselors and the answers to the questionnaire.

Findings

In this section, we present the findings from our evaluation of the program using themes chosen from Engel’s (2009) evaluation topics for counseling processes: (a) the preconditions of the counseling program, (b) the approach and working methods of the counseling program, (c) the effects experienced by the students, and (d) suggestions for improvement.

Preconditions of the Counseling Program

According to the evaluation, all students and counselors considered 2 hours a good length for the sessions. However, the counselors remarked that the limited duration of the sessions made it difficult to narrow down the many materials that could potentially be used. Four of the students said five sessions were enough, whereas three students said five sessions were too few and wanted more follow-up sessions in which to tackle problems in more depth during the semester. During the interview, the gifted students who participated in the study explained they initially registered for this counseling program out of curiosity and would not have participated if a fee was charged. They would

expect additional information regarding program content at the beginning of the program if they were paying.

Approach and Working Methods of the Counseling Program

In the questionnaire, all participating students indicated that the homogeneous grouping of gifted students offered added value for two main reasons: It (a) reduced the feeling of loneliness (e.g., “It’s nice to know that I’m not the only gifted person experiencing barriers”) and (b) led to “no prejudice against giftedness, which leads to open discussions and advice.”

The approach of not requiring a formal diagnosis of giftedness to participate was praised. Some students without formal diagnoses liked that they could participate in the program. Most formally diagnosed students did not notice any differences among others in the group, stating, for example, “I wouldn’t be able to label who was diagnosed and who was not.” However, one formally diagnosed student noted, “I could talk even easier, even faster, with people who had the official diagnosis.”

According to all coaches and almost all students, an intake interview would increase the threshold to participate in the program and is therefore not recommended. Facilitating a discussion in the first session about how to deal with giftedness or stereotypes of giftedness resulted in frank and natural conversations, thereby making an intake redundant for most students: “If you talk in group about impediments of giftedness, it is easier to start talking. If everyone already talked individually to the counselors, I think it’s harder to start talking.” However, one student expressed that he would have preferred a short individual intake to eliminate his concerns about whether he belonged to the targeted group.

During the evaluation, all students emphasized the importance of cocreation. It led to an increased involvement in the sessions and gave students the feeling that the program was tailored to them, which increased their motivation and attentiveness during the sessions. As one student said, “At the beginning of the sessions, you said that I could help shape the sessions, then I decided I wanted to continue the program, because it was tailor-made.” Five students who designed part of a session expressed that they liked the feeling of helping others. It made the students feel more involved, and the counselors could still achieve their planned learning goals, since they added their tips and theories to the student-led content. Responses showed that students appreciated the collaborative nature of the program that allowed their active participation and contribution. These program design components seemed to fulfill their intended purpose of encouraging the students’ study motivation by meeting their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, in line with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Regarding the composition of the sessions, the students expressed contrasting views about the ideal balance between theory, exercises, and discussion

time. Seven students found the time for discussion sufficient. As one said, “I don’t think any new things would have come up if we had an extra half-hour of discussion.” Another student wanted more discussions because those were most interesting to him, and another wanted more theory, explaining that it “streamlined the discussions” and gave students “names and descriptions of how you feel.” Students emphasized the added value of exercises, which encouraged them to reflect on their behavior and gave them the opportunity to practice new habits and insights.

The chat group provided an added value for the students. The chat group was used by the students to share their progress on their goals, which motivated them and contributed to the community feeling that was developed among the gifted students during the guided group sessions. One student suggested to further expand the chat group with various other initiatives, such as sharing a favorite book. Relatedly, the study sessions were well received, with five students suggesting to start the sessions even earlier, directly after discussing what an efficient study session looks like.

During the reflection, the counselors emphasized the added value of the guidebook for the actual counseling sessions and knowledge sharing with colleagues. Six students did not consider the homework as a burden, with one stating that “it didn’t take long to complete.” However, two participants did not see the added value of the questionnaires. They thought the information from the questionnaires was more useful for the counselors than for themselves. The copies of the theories and exercises gave the students an overview that they reviewed at home.

In this study, the counselors indicated that the mutual relationship between themselves and the students was very good. The students also indicated that they felt supported and understood by the counselors and by their fellow students. They could communicate openly about their own experiences and challenges, and shared information was treated confidentially. They could easily switch between different subjects when talking with the other participants, something they experienced less with nongifted friends. Because of this, nearly all students (except one) had met with other participants outside the program. The students described their relationships with each other differently. Two students talked of collegial relationships between students who understand each other because they have the same problems. Six students talked about the desire to start a friendship with one or more other participants with whom they shared more personal interests.

Effects Experienced by the Students

Overarching goals. The students evaluated the extent to which the four overarching goals of the counseling program were achieved. Students indicated that the first goal of open communication and social and academic integration was achieved because they experienced a community feeling, which allowed them to share their stories and learn from each other’s trials and errors in a safe environment. Participation in the program made them realize that they

were not the only gifted students who experienced obstacles, which reduced their stress. Several students also saw the need for further personal guidance. Mixed results were reported regarding the effectiveness of the program in addressing the second overarching goal of bolstering students' self-understanding and their acceptance of giftedness. Three students indicated that their self-understanding became more positive because they met similar people. Four students' self-understanding did not change. Four students reported not thinking differently about giftedness as a result of the program, whereas three students indicated they were doubting more whether they were gifted after all. The third overarching goal of this program aimed for the development of coping strategies to deal both with possible disadvantages of giftedness and to deal with exams. Overall, students reported this goal had been achieved. Five students indicated that the program had an influence on their approach toward their exams, as they used the various tips and coping strategies they had learned during the sessions in their exam preparations. Two students doubted that the program was the only factor that contributed to the positive influence on their exams, since they had additional support from other initiatives. One student indicated that the program had no influence on his approach to the exams. He took several tips and coping strategies from the counseling process but had little time between the sessions and the exams to internalize and master the strategies.

Individual goals. As part of the fourth overarching goal, the students each formulated several individual developmental goals at the start of the program. Responding to the questionnaire, six students indicated that the behavior targeted by their goals had changed because of the program. The changes included cleaning up a room before beginning studying; working with a weekly schedule; developing better time management, study, and writing skills; and building new routines that would give more motivation to study. One student indicated he did not experience behavioral changes because he did not have enough time to try out the advice given. He indicated that tackling fear of failure would have a major effect on his academic performance.

Suggestions for Improvement

Some students suggested the addition of a recurring discussion of one overarching action point for every student at the start of each session. Others indicated that organizing an extra session would be useful, in which students exchange their experiences in attempting to achieve their action points from the sessions. Another student suggested to add an extra follow-up session in the second semester in order to achieve more lasting changes.

Another student suggested an extra session on "how to survive as a gifted person in a world not adapted for you" and the job market. Similarly, one student suggested that a middle-aged gifted guest speaker could briefly outline their career and discuss obstacles that they encountered as a gifted person while studying and in the labor market.

Discussion

This study first addressed the question, “Which factors may limit the performance of gifted university students?” Various noncognitive characteristics and environmental conditions were identified that can explain why gifted students are performing below expectation.

Our purpose was to develop a counseling program for gifted university students. The topics covered by the counseling program were framed within particular contextual and intellectual considerations related to the high cognitive ability level of the group participants. Although it is sometimes not clear to what extent the hindering factors are unique to gifted students or more generally prevalent in the general student population, the program was developed in relation to these specific considerations.

At the start of the program, the participating students experienced barriers that aligned with most of those in our literature findings, such as lack of self-regulating skills, fear of failure, perfectionism, and low study motivation. In cocreation with the students, the themes of the counseling program sessions were selected.

Although a considerable amount has already been written about counseling gifted primary and secondary school students, little research has been published on the evaluation of the process or outcomes of these programs (Foley-Nicpon, 2002). Furthermore, evaluations of counseling programs for gifted university students hardly exist. Nevertheless, there is the recognition in the literature that counseling programs should be scientifically evaluated so that reliable and valid conclusions can be drawn about their usefulness (Heller, 1995). Our study contributes to this need by evaluating different aspects of the developed counseling program, such as the preconditions, the approach and working methods, and the effects experienced by the students.

The results of the short-term evaluation in our study suggest that the participants did experience behavioral changes, ranging from implementing tips to studying more efficiently and with more study motivation. The student without behavioral changes indicated that he needed more intensive guidance for his fear of failure. In their interviews, all participants indicated behavioral changes in the longer term, such as increased study motivation, better time management, and better study skills.

In general, the students indicated that three out of the four overarching goals had been achieved. First, the program led to more social and academic integration (the first overarching goal) because the students were able to communicate openly about their own experiences and challenges with other gifted students. Second, the participants were given tools for achieving their developmental goals (the fourth overarching goal) in their study process. Third, the students developed coping strategies (the third overarching goal) to deal with both barriers of giftedness and preparing for their exams. Due to conflicting results, it is unclear whether the second overarching goal of facilitating the acceptance process of giftedness and

increasing self-understanding was achieved. Whether and when the students were formally identified as gifted or came to perceive themselves as such can possibly explain the reported discrepancies in self-understanding and thinking about giftedness as a result of this program. Although the program was evaluated positively, participants suggested some additions, such as an adult gifted guest speaker or an extra follow-up session.

Implications for Counselors

Based on the findings in this study, recommendations can be made for the development of future counseling programs for gifted university students. In line with the recommendation from Colangelo and Peterson (2005), our study showed that the counselors should gain knowledge and understanding of the characteristics and needs of the targeted group before developing the program. Furthermore, consistent with Peterson (2007), counselors should consider the preconditions of the program (e.g., the time available) when formulating goals. Students should be referred to an individual trajectory when the need for more intensive treatment is identified. In addition, our study supports the findings of Zaffrann and Colangelo (1977) indicating that gifted students can benefit from being counseled in a homogeneous group, as this was found to lead to a community feeling that allowed the gifted students to share their feelings and thoughts, find similarities, and learn from each other. Next, in line with Colangelo and Peterson, our study suggests that beginning the counseling trajectory with discussions about nonthreatening subjects, such as how to deal with giftedness, can be an effective way to establish a group dynamic, paving the way for the discussion of more sensitive topics. According to our study, an intake interview is not essential because it can raise the barrier to participate. Results from this study also underscore the importance of the relationships between counselors and students and between students and students. Counselors should facilitate the counseling without prejudice, creating a safe environment for sharing vulnerabilities with mutual respect among the participants (Foley-Nicpon, 2002). Finally, it is interesting to note that, in our study, gifted university students appreciated the approach of being treated as equal partners through the cocreation of the program, confirming the tenets of self-determination theory that people are motivated when their needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Future counselors can facilitate the feeling of cocreation by giving students the opportunity to contribute to designing the topics and content of the program. Preparing an array of possible relevant topics that students can actively choose from on the basis of their perceived needs was an important aspect of cocreation in the current study that can be replicated by practitioners in other settings. Additionally, during sessions, the counselors can emphasize the flexibility of the program and communicate openly that students can prepare and facilitate parts of the program themselves.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has some limitations. First, we aimed to develop and evaluate a counseling program. Despite the exploratory nature and small sample size, the evaluation was thorough, including different methods. Nevertheless, future research may include a larger sample, thus allowing for more generalization of the findings. Second, because the roles of coach and evaluator of the counseling program were combined, this may have provided more positive answers than if these roles were separate. Because of the trusting and open relationship between evaluator/coach and student, which was built up during the sessions, we can assume students felt free to report negative results. However, separating the roles of coach and evaluator could have led to more objective results. Third, our findings may be limited because the data were collected from self-selected gifted university students. Finally, some participants took part in other counseling practices while attending the group counseling from this study. Therefore, our study may not include all influencing factors that may have led to the behavioral changes among the participants.

Some conditions for an appropriate counseling program are specifically applicable to the targeted group of gifted university students, whereas other conditions are applicable for all students. Future research can examine this distinction. The high percentage of gifted students with diagnoses of learning or developmental disabilities, such as ADHD and autism, participating in the counseling program was noteworthy. There is a necessity for further research into the possible vulnerability of this group during the transition to higher education and their needs for additional support.

Conclusion

Given the various noncognitive personal characteristics and environmental conditions that can hinder the performance of gifted university students, some of these students can benefit from a counseling program in the transition to higher education, as developed and evaluated in this study.

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