SURVEY OF 1985 PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS AND THEIR PARENTS

American Association for Gifted Children

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INTRODUCTION

The United States Presidential Scholars Program was established in 1964 to honor our nation's most distinguished graduating seniors each year. Since then, 121 Scholars have been chosen annually on the basis of academic accomplishment, leadership and involvement in school and community. The final selections are made by a Commission appointed by the President with assistance from the U.S. Department of Education. Scholars are chosen among a pool of 1500 seniors who have scored exceptionally well on the SAT or ACT and who have submitted additional materials to support their candidacies.

Beginning in 1979 the Commission has also chosen annually 20 Presidential Scholars in the Arts from among those students who have participated in the Arts Recognition and Talent Search (ARTS) and have also confirmed their candidacies with supporting materials in the visual or performing arts or in creative writing.

Each year the Presidential Scholars are invited to Washington, DC as guests of the Commission to participate in a National Recognition Week where they are honored for their accomplishments.

With the support of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the American Association for Gifted Children has been privileged to participate in the celebratory activities. During the closing reception at the Department of State, it has distributed awards of $1,000 from the Foundation to each of the Scholars. In 1985, as in the previous year, it also held a workshop for the parents who accompanied their Scholars to Washington.

AAGC enclosed two short questionnaires—one for the Scholar, another for a parent of the Scholar—with each check. This year the questionnaires were designed to elicit some demographic information but focused on the effects of the Presidential Scholars Award (and other recognition) on the recipients, their
families, friends, and others in their communities. They also provided respondents an opportunity to identify sources of the Scholar's motivation to achieve.

The results of the surveys of Scholars and parents are presented on the following pages. Data from the survey of Scholars are presented first and are followed by a selection of Scholars' observations on a number of topics. Data from the survey of parents are presented next. Several are quoted extensively at the end of this section because they capture the flavor of responses from the group as a whole.

Responses from both Scholars and their parents suggest affective and demographic factors that appear to encourage high achievement. The affective factors lend themselves to intervention by parents, teachers and concerned others; the demographic factors do not. It is my hope that the results of these investigations will be helpful to the members of AACG and others as they consider new activities on behalf of the gifted and their families.

THE SURVEY OF SCHOLARS

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire for Scholars gave them an opportunity to report on the effects of the award and other forms of recognition on them and on those around them. It provided an opportunity for the Scholars to comment on their sources of motivation, probable college major, and career choice. Ten short items on the questionnaire elicited demographic information. In a departure from last year, Scholars were asked to indicate whether they were Presidential Scholars or Scholars in the Arts. The Scholars were not asked to indicate
their sex, but this information was attainable from other sources in all but two cases, where the questionnaires were returned anonymously. Only minor differences between the sexes emerged in the patterns of responses.

Description of Sample

From the group of 141 possible respondents, we received 119 completed questionnaires, for a total response rate of 84%. One hundred and seven (88 percent) of the Presidential Scholars replied, as did 12 (60 percent) of the Arts Scholars.

Differences between the two groups of Scholars that emerged were in SAT scores, class rank and future goals, a not unexpected occurrence since they are selected by different criteria.

The high level of academic achievement of the Presidential Scholars (excluding Arts Scholars) was confirmed by the following: 65% were valedictorians, and 27% more were graduated in the top five in their class. Boys' average SAT scores were 712 Verbal and 735 Math; girls' were 715 Verbal and 717 Math. That test scores and class rank are not the sole criteria for Presidential Scholarship is suggested by the following statistics: Almost 9% of those selected had combined SAT scores of below 1300. (A combined SAT of less than 1200 was recorded by one valedictorian). And roughly the same number were not in the top 10 in their class.

Only six of the Arts Scholars reported SAT scores; their Verbal scores ranged from 420 to 740; their and Math scores, from 380 to 720. Their combined SAT scores (V+M) were significantly lower than those of the Presidential Scholars.
Demographics

The demographic data indicate that Scholars tend to come from intact middle- or upper middle-class families. A large number (85%) of the Scholars reside with both parents. (The same percentage was recorded last year.) We suspect that this percentage is significantly higher than the national average for high school seniors, given the country’s high divorce rate. As Cheryl Milam, author of last year’s report noted, “further statistical analysis may reveal a high correlation (between intact families) and high achievers as defined by class rank and SAT scores.”

Birth order, particularly being first born (42%) or an only child (9%), has also been suggested in the literature as correlating with achievement. That 51% of the Scholars are first born or only children lends some support to this hypothesis.

The educational level of the parents seems to be of even greater significance. Some 27% of the fathers have a doctorate; another 31% have other graduate degrees, and another 26% are college graduates. This means that 84% of the fathers have at least completed college. The Scholars’ mothers are also highly educated. About 4% have a doctoral degree; another 28% have other graduate degrees, and 49% more are college graduates; thus 81% have at least a baccalaureate degree. It is not surprising, therefore, that 40% of the parents are actively engaged in their professions. Roughly 10% of the mothers are teachers, as are just over 3% of the fathers.
Reactions of Scholars to Recognition for Achievement

The reactions of the Scholars to their achievements and to the Presidential Scholar Award were generally positive. Over 90% of the Scholars expressed personal satisfaction with having won the award, often in such charged terms as "overjoyed," "ecstatic," "thrilled," and "extremely honored." (The other 9% did not respond to this question.) One girl described herself as "in secret rapture," and another admitted, "I haven't yet come back down to earth."

More than one-fourth of the Scholars reported a boost in self-esteem or confidence, and many of these said they may go on to further achievement for having won the award. As one Scholar wrote,

...Having others push me and and believe in me has expanded my goals and my views of what I can do. In other words, because of my being in the spotlight, others have seen in me potentials that I never would have recognized myself.

With all the clarity that hindsight affords, it seems to me that it would have been better had the question to Scholars about the positive and negative effects of recognition not been "loaded" with examples. Fortunately many respondents pointed out the error of assuming that "pressure" was a negative factor. To most of them, "higher expectations" and "increased pressure" were seen as positive outcomes. For such Scholars "pressure" was synonymous with heightened commitment, increased responsibility to develop one's talents, an external affirmation of one's self-worth—an indefinable stimulus that nourishes and sustains one's inner self-actualizing drives. A few of the most inner-directed Scholars felt that these drives were independent of any outside forces—whether positive or negative. It was for a minority of Scholars that
pressure was interpreted as an unwelcome external force, burdensome or anxiety-provoking. The following quotations are typical of those correcting the implication that pressure was negative:

...While it [the award] is accompanied by pressure and high expectations, I'm not sure I wouldn't have placed the same pressures on myself to achieve greater things if I had not received it.

...I don't worry about increased pressure because my parents have never pressured me. I pressure myself. In fact, I thrive on pressure. Also gaining recognition is not the only way I receive satisfaction. Getting through my BC Calculus course meant almost as much to me as being a Presidential Scholar. Oh, it definitely wasn't as much fun, but it made me a stronger person.

...Now, I am expected to do well always. There is no more room for mistakes and even a rest from the instrument because of the constant "must" of being prepared to perform is there.

...As to the pressure this might put on me, I've never really worried about pressure. I guess I've always been aware of its presence, but I never push myself farther than I want to go.

...When I talked to my doctor a few days ago, he told me, "You know that your classmates will think you have failed unless you do something absolutely incredible with your life, don't you?" I am afraid of disappointing myself, because I realize that a worthwhile life does not necessarily make a huge impact on society. I am concerned about disappointing others. I will have to work hard in order to be true to myself.

...The recognition is encouraging, and as an incentive its value far outweighs the possible pressure.

As mentioned earlier, a minority (28%) of students listed some negative reactions to awards and recognition. Chief among these were feelings of embarrassment, alienation from peers, guilt, self-doubt, and being "on display." Some of these feelings are captured in the quotations that follow:
Although I am generally a person of great self-confidence, sometimes I have times of doubt—"an impostor complex." At times like those I feel that I don't really deserve my good grades or the various awards I have received. I fear that some day someone will find me out and expose to the world that I am not what I have pretended to be. These thoughts are pretty silly, especially since I know I have worked hard and I truly am good at what I do, but nonetheless they happen.

It seems as if some people cannot help but allow this and other awards to place a distance between them and myself. This has been very subtle but it is something which I am much bothered by.

Being a Presidential Scholar was a complication in my life from the time I learned about it. I was smothered in praise and press. I wasn't allowed to be myself because of the Presidential Scholar image. However, I had such a great time in D.C. it's OK.

Despite my dislike of winning awards and a sort of "I take it all in stride/this bores me" attitude towards honors, I hate not winning them more.

It gets to a point where people keep feeding your ego, and you lose touch with reality. My place in society is not on pedestal or shouldn't be anyway."

Another concern expressed by Scholars was that of appearing or, less often, actually becoming arrogant or conceited. My favorite comment was this one: "I hope I never fully realize what I have accomplished, for I will likely become intolerable if I do." Easily the most candid remarks, however, were these:

For me a negative effect might be that I have developed somewhat of an attitude that I am better than everyone else. Although this could be true in some areas, I feel that being the object of much attention sometimes leads me to assume wrongly about other people who do not have a list of honors behind them:

Comments on National Recognition Week were not specifically asked for, but some 18% of the Scholars volunteered its praises. Most often mentioned was the satisfaction of meeting and talking with the other Scholars.
National Recognition Week was one of the most unique and enjoyable experiences I've ever had. It was so refreshing not to have to censor my speech to avoid sounding pretentious, to be agile and candidly state that I prefer Mozart to Michael Jackson and know that I'd meet with agreement rather than derision. The lecture/discussion with Benjamin Hart in which we matched wits and tested beliefs was purely exhilarating fun. Afterwards, several Scholars agreed when I expressed the conviction that this is what school should be like. All my life, I've ached to be challenged and pushed to stretch my potential. National Recognition Week gave me a taste of that I'll never forget.

Scholars' Report of the Reactions of Others to Their Awards

The second question on the survey concerned the impact of the Scholars' achievements on family members, friends, and others. A preponderance (80%) of the Scholars reported that their parents were very pleased and proud for them.

Several of Scholars felt that the award had conferred status upon their family. (The remaining Scholars did not mention parents in their responses.)

On the other hand, it appears that brothers and sisters, particularly younger siblings, do not always share in the glory. Feelings, on the part of siblings, of resentment, of jealousy, or of being "eclipsed" were noted by 26% of the Scholars. (Far less often the Scholars reported their siblings had completely positive reactions to the award.) Concerns such as those expressed below were not uncommon:

...My sister is also proud, but she is uncomfortable with this achievement, as with my past ones, because it will mean increased pressure for her. At every school we've ever attended, I have preceded her by two years, as has my reputation. Her teachers and friends expect her to follow in my footsteps and achieve what I have. But these expectations are unreasonable. My parents and I accept her differences and limitations, but the inability of anyone else to do the same makes school, not to mention her other activities, unnecessarily difficult for her.
Friends seem to have been less directly affected. Approximately 31% of the Scholars said the award had no effect on their relationship with friends. About 47% reported that their friends' reactions were completely positive, while 22% reported that their friends had mixed feelings. In a few cases, Scholars described friends or peers who were academic rivals as being jealous or resentful:

...When I was selected to be a Presidential Scholar, the other student from my school who was chosen to be a finalist was extremely disappointed. Even now he will mention the fact that I was able to go to Washington, and he was not. Although I realize it was not my "fault" that he was not chosen, I feel almost guilty for excelling.

Positive effects from the awards on Scholars' hometowns, schools and/or teachers were reported in some 13% of the responses, and in one case it may have helped save a career:

...It has had a wonderful effect on my Distinguished Teacher. A bright, conscientious English teacher, she has been showing signs of burn out after only four or five years at our high school. She seems to have taken a new pride and interest in her work.

Sources of Motivation

A clear majority (65%) of the Scholars consider themselves self-motivating. Motivation from within was variously described as "a desire to be the best I can," as perfectionism, or as an innate love of learning. Many of these students credited their parents as the original sources of motivation; overall, 52% of the Scholars credited their families as early sources of motivation.

Teachers were mentioned by 9% of the respondents. Religious and/or altruistic feelings were mentioned as having some influence by 17%. "Friends" appeared as influential in 8% of the responses.
A handful of students posed some thought-provoking questions concerning motivation. Two of them are quoted here:

...This question has bothered me for a very long time, and I fervently wish I had the answer to it. My drive does not come from outside influences, such as parents or friends. I provoke myself into these feats of "derring-do." Why I push myself like this, however, I simply do not know. I always strive for the best way, almost always seek the hardest road, and put myself out on a limb very often to attempt to accomplish something. I do not do this for pleasure, nor for the rewards; I do this to satisfy some compelling feeling in myself that says I am a failure unless I do A, B, and C. This feeling has no definition or character, it simply exists beyond my scrutiny and directs my life. I am, in a very real sense to me, only a servant—a tool, even—to something larger than myself.

...I have always been a very highly motivated person. From what I draw this motivation, I know not for sure. I believe it may have sprung from my initial success in school; once I started having success, I wished to continue it, and have done all I could to continue this success. This is but a theory, and I cannot say that I'm sure of it, but I am sure that I do crave winning in all that I do; in fact, some people even say that I am "driven."

College and the Future.

The high aspirations of this selected group are reflected in their college and career plans. Two things stand out: (a) Many (41%) intend a career in the sciences; (b) overall, their plans are quite diverse.

Medicine is the most popular career choice at this time, mentioned by 17% of the Scholars. It was roughly twice as popular among girls as among boys, while roughly twice as many boys (13%) as girls (6%) have their sights set on a career in engineering. Over 59% intend on a career as a professional, while 14% are undecided. Ten of the 12 Arts Scholars envisage a career in the arts or as teachers in the arts. About 95% of all Scholars would be willing to participate in a follow-up study.
Conclusions

Scholars' personal reactions to their achievements and recognition are for the most part quite positive. Along with the elation of being singled out some other feelings exist. A chief concern is to live up to this unique honor. Most Scholars make a point of reassuring us that they can handle it. If one is to judge from their past performance, they probably can.

As a group, the 1985 Presidential Scholars are academically capable, well rounded, and occasionally eloquent. What assures their success (however one defines it) is that core of self-motivation that few of them could satisfactorily explain—even to themselves.

In the demographic data, however, one we have found key elements that enhanced their achievement. Coming from two-parent families, being the eldest or only child, and having educated parents in the professional ranks are frequently encountered characteristics of the Scholars.

Is it among the Presidential Scholars that one would look to find the "dark side" of being gifted? I think not: the selection process mitigates against the selection of either the "oddball" isolate or the genius without social concerns for this honor. To be selected for the Award, it was not enough for the youngster to be merely bright or a high achiever. It should be remembered that "leadership" and "service to school and community" were among the additional criteria employed to distinguish among self-elected candidates from the original pool identified either by high SAT or ACT scores or recognized achievement in the ARTS Program.

It may also be that many of the Scholars are not ready to fully share their feelings—whether pleasant or unpleasant—regarding this latest and most
prestigious award. Thus, I support the idea of a follow-up study, one which would further benefit from Scholars' insights into the Presidential Scholar experience as it evolves.

These Scholars are the "successful" gifted. They have been able to develop their talents without becoming alienated or depressed and without alienating others. I have a hunch that some of the strategies that have allowed them to do so were consciously developed. Why not ask them directly if they can suggest how agents (external to the family) could become supportive surrogate parents for those gifted (and their siblings) born into less nourishing environments? I think that many scholars would be delighted to participate in such an endeavor.

I chose the comments that follow for their thought-provoking qualities rather than their representativeness:

TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS

...My only problems were with teachers. First, I think several were offended because I had chosen to invite another teacher to Washington. I am sorry for this, especially as I have had many excellent teachers, and really do not think I owe my beliefs or achievements to any one of them. Given the choice, I would have designated my mother as Distinguished Teacher, with Sesame Street's cast in second place, since these are the people who taught me to read.

...Although my parents and my brother were very pleased when I was chosen a Presidential Scholar, my classmates and the faculty thought it was weird. Academic achievement is not considered important at my school or in my community. Often students who win academic awards are ridiculed or ignored, while those who play 3rd-string basketball are cheered on and given days off from school as rewards. Because of this, rewards from outside my high school are especially important to me.
...I think I was passed over for local scholarships due to an impression that I could "write my own ticket" as far as college funding is concerned.

...Except for a few extraordinary friends and teachers, my motivation has generally come from myself. When I complained that I was bored with the slow pace of Spanish class as a sophomore, I was not listened to. I then proceeded to look for alternative schooling and the administration hindered rather than helped my search. To be perfectly honest, my school as a whole has not seemed to know I existed until all of these awards and acceptances started rolling in. So many of my major accomplishments have been outside of my home school that when I started getting so much press for being a scholar, people (teachers) actually came up to me saying that they didn't know who I was prior to that.

RELATIONS WITH PEERS

...In high school, I was accepted by my peers more in spite of my intelligence than for it. I don't want to have to prove myself again in college.

...I feel that receiving recognition has had a sort of intimidating effect on my peers....A very close friend told me that he has a low view of himself because he compares himself to me. This idea of trying to do all that I do is very disappointing and frustrating to others.

...Fearing further isolation, I have tried to make my "achievements" as unobtrusive as possible. I have been more or less successful in the past and believe that this honor will also have little impact.

...I am very proud of myself and my accomplishments, but, ironically, I do not feel myself to be in a position to share my pride with many others, because as a plebe in the US Navy Academy one wishes to stand out as little as possible.
MOTIVATION

...From my earliest recollection, my mother told me explicitly and implicitly that I was somehow above average and that she expected me to perform as such. I'll be damned if I didn't believe her and began to have the same expectation.

...Motivation is a hard force to categorize and even harder to locate but I believe that my motivation derives from my own belief in excellence. I continually chide myself for not having done more with what little ability I have. I am always at a loss to explain how people with talent can waste it...and in order to be honest with myself I must push myself as hard as I can. If I did not use the talent I have, I could not live with myself. It thus seems as if my motivation is caused more by guilt and self-appraisal than by anything else.

...This achievement is a source of motivation for me when I am faced with a task that seems too difficult for me. The recognition has been overwhelming at times, and I feel it is more than I deserve.

...For as long as I can remember, my parents have given me an incredible amount of freedom. They never told me I couldn't play in our living room, dirty up my clothes, or try and find the ugliest spider in our backyard. Mom and Dad let us explore everything as we grew up, and they were always there to answer our questions. This freedom has allowed me to pursue a professional career; more importantly, to pursue it without fear of my working environment. I'm motivated because I'm free to be motivated.

...I truly feel that I studied in school for the joy of learning, and not just for recognition. I appreciate the fact that my academic record helped to persuade several organizations to support me as I continue my education. The recognition is nice, but not necessary for me to feel good about myself.

PERSPECTIVE

...My only concern is that this and other recognition does not (consciously or subconsciously) make me feel that I have "achieved all there is to achieve."
...After reaching such a scholastic pinnacle at age 18, perhaps I should shift my energies somewhat to give attention to other areas of my life.

...Those "extraordinary abilities and achievements" everyone keeps talking about seem altogether ordinary to me. I keep thinking about the student who struggles through school, the student who studies each night and still has to worry at report card time. On the other hand, school has always been easy for me, and grades never a problem. Who deserved more recognition between the two of us? Somehow it seems that I am taking credit for something I had very little to do with.

...In addition, I am the sort of misfit who stays up all night talking politics or philosophy, takes a book to lunch, and would rather study Physics or Russian poetry than dance. "Normal" teenage society sees such behavior as deviant. The award has assured me that my activity choices are far from harmful. Thank you.

GENERAL

...It is both reassuring and exciting to be reminded that in a day when the arts are experiencing little support, there are others suffering the same hardships and sharing the same joy as myself.

...At a time when negative aspects of teenagers and their behavior seem to be a primary source of interest to the news media, I feel a sense of pride in being a part of a group of teenagers recognized for their positive achievements.

...I feel elated. The award made me realize that what I had always done as standard was really extraordinary.

...I was surprised in myself that I had earned such an honor, and surprised that it was really I who was considered the best girl in Delaware.

...Usually when I receive an award or do something praiseworthy, I am caught between the desire to shout the news from the rooftops and the fear of becoming an egotist or an intellectual snob.
...On myself, there is no negative effect because the Presidential Scholars is such an all encompassing program (tests the whole person) and is so honorable that the usual "brain" stigma is not attached.

...The Presidential Scholarship helped me to see just how far I have come—and how far I might go.

...All things considered, I am quite happy with the way my life has worked out, though there are still times when I question the value of hard work and the extent one should go in order to achieve.

...I was at first inclined to say that my being a Presidential Scholar was totally the result of chance, since I had thought that all Presidential Scholars were supposed to have some special godlike powers or something of that nature. After meeting the other scholars, though, I found that they were, in fact, not like that. They were, like me, just young, bright individuals who worked hard. Thus, I can have some pride in myself in that I could take some credit in the achievement of this honor.

...It is impossible not to wonder whether it was merely hard work or real, natural talent which has been the source of one's academic success.

...Receiving various honors and recognition, such as the status of Presidential Scholar, always produces a multitude of feelings in me: surprise, excitement, a sense of honor, pride, and embarrassment or awkwardness (as my honor is publicized or announced over the school loudspeaker). Certainly, many of these emotions could be destructive if carried to an extreme. But luckily they seem to alternate quickly, mix, and mingle. and when the flurry dies down, I am just "Sarah" the same as I was before.

...I have never felt more sure of myself before. The thought that I have achieved what I have through my art makes my heart beat faster. This has given me more push to better things.

The full texts of three Scholars' remarks are quoted below:

...I feel rather silly that I have worked for 12 years, only to receive recognition at this late time, and to be suddenly congratulated and lauded for something I have worked for for 12 years.
And yes, it's going to be damned hard getting over this ridiculous ego trip.

I think that my parents have finally been rewarded, in a small way, for the work they have done for 17 years. They were a bit more delirious than I. I surprised a few of my teachers (especially the ones who said, "You're not so hot, you egotistical bastard").

My parents have been one of the greatest sources of my motivation, but of course self-motivation is the only true motivation any person can use for any length of time. I suppose being ugly for the great majority of my life also encouraged me to achieve in other fields where I had a chance. (AND I am CHINESE.)

I can only repeat what I told the people from the Dodge Foundation: I consider my years in primary education a complete waste, if not seriously damaging to my intellectual, emotional, and social growth. If it were not for my strong family background, resulting in an intellectual community outside of school, I could well be a drugo crazy drop-out at this very time. My six years spent in primary school were painful, and I have found this situation to be true with some (but not all) of my gifted friends. HIGH SCHOOL IS TOO LATE TO WORK FOR GIFTED STUDENTS. At the high school level, one can basically train—nothing else. Giftedness cannot be trained.

I cannot stress too much the need for a good primary education for gifted students. Again, we see that the students who are allowed a good intellectual environment throughout their formative years form a much greater percentage of identified gifted students in high school. At the risk of sounding reverse-racist, I will point out the gross over-representation of my ethnic group, the Chinese. Nine out of 141 Scholars were Chinese; that is approximately a 1000 to 2000% over-representation of our segment of the general population.

That is only Chinese, not counting other Asians. During the week, I also saw a gross over-representation of the Jewish ethnic group. I am only pointing these anomalies out because they are so obvious. What is it that makes certain ethnic groups overachieve? Whatever it is, you had better find out, if you are serious about what you are doing.

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...Receiving honors like this one is always lots of fun and very rewarding, but it usually lacks a feeling of correspondence to anything I've done. Rarely do I actually feel "I've worked hard, and as a result I've earned this award." This is probably because I've never approached education as a route toward earning rewards (besides the reward of knowledge). My efforts in areas where I've received no overt recognition are no less than those in areas where I have. This is not, of course, to belittle honors such as the Presidential Scholarhoo. Such things are great boosters for self-esteem, which I believe is the key to achievement. They are very reassuring when one is preparing to tackle a whole new level of challenge, such as college. Being commended in this way leaves me feeling confident in my quest for new subjects to master.

I see the negative effects as rather minor, really. I don't see people as waiting for me to "fail" so they can pounce on me and point out that I was a Presidential Scholar once, years ago. In my own eyes, I have fairly high expectations, but they've been raised only a little higher by the flood of recognition I've been hit with lately. Maybe if I had been isolated years ago and never rewarded or compared with others, my expectations would be different, but as it is, I know where I stand and where I hope to end up. If I fail to reach the level I seek, I may feel bad, but it won't be due to all the awards I used to receive, it will be due to my own assessment of my ability. In short, Presidential Scholarhoo really doesn't set one up for a larger fall than one would have had otherwise.

The impact of this honor on my parents had been a vindication of their policy of never pushing me ahead through school, though I may have been capable of moving up, and a cause to smirk a little at the "Gifted and Talented" programs that never singled me out when I was younger. They are deservedly proud, and their high faith in my ability to learn and achieve has been strengthened and proven valid. There have been no discernible negative effects on them—they've never been pushy about my education or about telling others about my accomplishments, and they don't seem any more apt to pressure me now, and, as a result of the publicity, they will never have to bring me up again. I'll be well-enough known on my own. This, I'm sure, will be very pleasant for them.
My friends, while they may harbor a new, unspoken respect for me, have treated me no differently. This sort of thing really doesn't come into play in daily situations, so not much is changed. Also, they are used to my frequent honors, so this one is just one more, even if it is considerably more prestigious.

The one person I see affected negatively by this is my brother. Only two years younger than me, he finds himself in my shadow academically, at least in his own eyes. I don't look at him this way, but he still has a certain amount of resentment for me, I think. This is particularly true lately, with my college acceptance, my numerous graduation awards and valedictory, and the Presidential Scholarship with all its attention. I conspicuously enjoy all of it, and I can see how this can be hard to live with. Now that it all has passed, however, he has returned to good humor toward me, for which I am glad. Next year I'll be away and he can go on without my presence to continually overshadow his accomplishments. This will be a transitory condition.

My prime motivation has always been interest in almost all areas purely for their own sake. I can honestly say that the urge to compete has never driven me, only the urge to learn.

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PARENTS' SURVEY

Introduction

This section of the report focuses on the impact of the Presidential Scholars Award from the parents' viewpoints. These were elicited through a 7-item questionnaire concerning (1) feelings about their child's achievements in general and his or her receiving this particular award, (2) perceptions of the child's reactions to achievement and recognition, (3) the impact of the award on the family, and (4) the Scholar's sources of motivation.

Additionally, parents were asked (a) whether they attended the ceremonies in Washington, D.C., (b) whether they attended the parents' seminar (and their
feelings concerning the seminar if they did), and (c) whether they would be
willing to participate in a more extended study.

Description of the Sample

The completed questionnaires from parents of 98 of the 141 Scholars
represent just under 70% of the total group of parents.

Parents' Views of Achievement and Recognition

Over 90% of the parents reported very positive feelings about their
child's achievements. The other 10% offered no opinions on this point, taking
the opportunity instead to criticize their local schools or to volunteer
similar remarks. Comments such as "a mountaintop experience" and "the
greatest thrill of our lives" appeared often. One mother described her
feelings this way: "Very pleased surprise—followed by joy—changing to
pride—growing to (a) contented (sense of) justice." Some 24% of the group
mentioned the hard work that helped earn Scholarhood, while 19% felt it
affirms the value of educational achievement. Many in this latter group
offered comments similar to those below:

...This award was the greatest honor he's ever received.
With so much emphasis placed on sports in our society,
it's been so refreshing to have scholastic and
leadership qualities recognized in such a wonderful way!
As his parent we've always known what an outstanding
person John is, but it's good to have the whole
community know it too!

Similarly, 14% of the group viewed their child's achievement as a triumph
over conditions in the school or community. To illustrate we include these
remarks:

...Our daughter grew up in a very small town setting with
almost no peers on her level of intellect. This posed a
number of problems. A small high school also has
limited offerings. Yet, we were unwilling to send her
off to a private high school. I suppose the
Presidential Scholar award in some way "made up" for
some of what we may feel she missed out on.
More than one-fourth of the parents expressed appreciation for National Recognition Week, occasionally effusively, as below:

...One of the most valuable experiences of getting the award was the opportunity to spend a week with the other Presidential Scholars. This experience was so stimulating and fascinating to our daughter that she hardly had any sleep for the entire week. She and the other students with whom she spent her time were not partying, but were TALKING to each other, all night long. If there was ever an argument for grouping gifted children together, this was strong supporting evidence of it.

On the negative side, some parents (16%) believe this latest award may add pressure on their child to achieve in the future. The mother of one Arts Scholar is concerned that the award has precipitated a premature career choice. More typical of this group was the remark, "I sincerely hope that the urge to achieve is not translated into an overwhelming drive to win at any price." On the other hand, three parents said their child has felt less pressured as a result of recent achievements and recognition. A father observed:

...Our child in the past seemed to need the highest levels of achievement to feel important. Recently, he seems to be more comfortable with himself and as a result accepts recognition more graciously and less compulsively. We hope it stays that way.

Parents' Views on Child's Feelings About Achievement and Recognition

A majority (70%) of the parents indicated that their child has a healthy attitude towards achievement and recognition. Comments such as "Public recognition isn't nearly as important to him as self-fulfillment" were pervasive in these responses.
About 19% felt that Scholarhood had produced mixed feelings in their child. Embarrassment and self-doubt were the most commonly identified negative feelings. Hyper concern for others was also cited, as in the words of this parent:

...She is overly sensitive to the feelings of her friends and classmates and hides her joy at receiving honors so as not to make them feel bad. As a result, she does not derive the joy and sense of accomplishment that she should when she receives an award.

A small minority (4%) expressed concern about their child's compulsive drive to achieve.

Parents' View of Impact of Achievement and Recognition on the Family and Others

Many (70%) of the parents saw a positive impact on themselves and members of the family from their child's achievement and recognition. Clearly many of these are delighted with the praise and publicity attending the award, while some reported that their child's success has become a positive example for other family members and friends. One mother commented:

...The impact on our family and friends has been positive. For our immediate family it is a personal sense of achievement. For our relatives it is the pride of having a member of the clan attain the rank of Presidential Scholar. For our friends it is a warm feeling of renewed motivation to continue pursuing goals according to our common philosophy of living and raising our children. Others have asked, "What is it that you do that I need to do?"

On the other hand, in one-fourth of the families parents recognized that siblings have at least temporarily been negatively affected by this latest wave of recognition. Most often mentioned were younger siblings. Some concerns and insights on this situation are reflected in the following comments:
...The award most affects her brother Larry. He is a student at Arizona State University. He was not as receptive to all the publicity that his sister received. There is more rivalry between them. Larry did not choose to take his academic achievements as seriously as his brother and sister, and scholastic efforts were not as successful. With some more maturity, this rivalry should lessen. The separation that comes next fall should give Becky and Larry the space which they both need right now.

...A more serious concern we had as parents was the effect of our older son's glory on our younger son. Equally talented and ambitious, he is only 14 months younger and is competitive with older brother. We didn't want our younger son to feel pressured or slighted or inferior in any way; but giving him security and confidence was tricky. He's much too perceptive to be taken in by flattery or empty gesture. Finding ways to help him develop his best in his own way and feel properly credited remains a challenge.

...We're all proud of Gary, but his continued achievements are hard on his 16-year-old sister. She feels pressure from peers and teachers to mirror Gary in some way. She does not like being an extension of Gary and would like her own identity. So far, she chose to have relative difficulty in her classes and to not take part in Gary's past activities even if she might enjoy them (i.e., being on the newspaper staff).

On a brighter note, 12% of the group reported completely positive reactions from siblings.

Favorable reactions from peers were indicated by 38% of the parents, while 9% reported some negative responses from peers. Approximately 20% of the parents felt that the community shared in the award, while a few (6%) reported mixed reactions from teachers.

Parents' Views of Sources of Child's Motivation

In this portion of the survey some of the general impressions I had begun to develop about the parents from the Survey of Scholars were confirmed: namely, that the parents highly value education and doing one's best (but not compulsively), and that they are highly involved in their children's
development. Here, as elsewhere, the statistics don't tell the full story. Over half (52%) of the group saw a supportive home environment as an important factor in their child's achievement, and a number of these mention high-achieving siblings, often as role models or as competitors. But also revealing to us was the quality of many of the responses (some of which covered several pages), of which a sampling are presented here:

"...Our whole family enjoys learning and believes that man moves toward greater humanity through the acquisition of knowledge. It is a grand adventure that enriches our lives and gives us the tools to serve one another. This attitude of joy in discovery has served as a powerful motivating source for both our children."

"...Education is the #1 priority in our home. All of our children have been high achievers; Brent being the last one has had good role models and good examples to pattern his life after."

"...As a former teacher, I believe that my being at home with our daughters in those early years has helped all of them. I tried to create an atmosphere for having fun and encouraging their curiosities--library books after lunch, painting, puppets, etc. Good nutrition and little sugar has helped! We were parents who were consistent with the children."

A majority (73%) of the parents identified intrinsic motivation---including love of learning or curiosity---in their child. Comments such as "He is motivated from within," and "was born with a question on her lips" were common in these responses. But here again, evidence of parents' involvement occasionally emerges even as they downplay their contribution to their child's achievements, as in the remarks that follow:

"...Beth's motivation comes from within herself. We have always been supportive and have recognized her special abilities from the beginning, but we have also allowed her to do her own thing. I have been involved in activities at school, in swim clubs, and in gifted education but I know parents cannot make the child excel."
...I have no idea what motivates or has motivated our son(s). Each seems to have internalized his goals to the extent that he wants to do his best in whatever he decides to do. They have intellectual energy and curiosity, but I don't know where their particular drive comes from. I'm just glad they have an enthusiasm for living. Our family has spent a lot of time together—talking and travelling. We spent 17 months abroad (1980-81) when my husband was an exchange professor in England; we visited 23 countries, from Russia to Egypt and Norway to Turkey. We have shared a lot of experiences, and both boys developed a healthy appreciation for what America offers. My husband and I have tried to give our sons opportunity; it was up to them, however, to take advantage of whatever was available.

Some (18%) of the parents mentioned positive influences on their child from teachers or good schools, while 6% saw religious or altruistic values as contributing to their child's achievements.

Evaluation of the Parents' Workshop by Participants

Approximately 44% of the Scholar's parents group attended the AAGC workshop on the last day of National Recognition Week. Of these participants, 19% said that they found the presentation informative, while the same number said that they enjoyed the opportunity to meet with other parents.

The comments that follow typified the responses from these two groups:

...It was interesting and informative for us since this is our first child to prepare for college.

...I thought the session's primary benefit was getting to know the other parents in the small groups.

Some 42% expressed some disappointment in the presentation or suggested possible improvements on future seminars, while 21% were critical of the session.
The criticism most often raised was that the topic presented—the transition to college was too general. It was also superfluous for the parents who already had children in college. Parents wrote that they would have preferred a program that focused specifically on issues related to gifted children. Many parents would have welcomed more time to share concerns and experiences with other parents. One suggested a gathering for parents earlier in the week so that they could arrange to get together at meetings and events that would follow. Another suggested sending a survey similar to this one to parents far enough in advance of National Recognition Week to permit a discussion of the results in Washington.

A number of parents suggested topics for future seminars. Several in this group were interested in learning more about the Presidential Scholars Program—its history, the selection process, statistics on the Scholars and follow-up stories on past Scholars. They also sought more information on the AAGC (three parents expressed an interest in working for the organization on a volunteer basis), as well as programs for the gifted sponsored by state and national government.

Most of the topics suggested, however, concern the special needs of the gifted child. These included: Helping a high achiever prepare for the competitive atmosphere of college, helping a gifted child adjust to being different, and handling the frustration of dealing with a limited school system. In sum, the parents attached great value to a session for themselves but hoped it would be focused differently in future years.
Conclusions

What we learn from reviewing the responses to this survey is that parents' views on the impact achievement and recognition are generally similar to those of the Scholars. Over 90% of both groups express positive feelings toward recognition, particularly towards the Presidential Scholars Award. Only 4% of the parents expressed any concerns about their child's attitude toward achievement and recognition, while roughly the same number of Scholars expressed similar concerns. (I did not report this figure in the report on Scholars, because it was such a small percentage that I included these responses in the 28% that expressed some negative reactions to awards—such as embarrassment, guilt, and self-doubt. Incidentally, subtracting roughly 4% from this group brings it closer into line with the 19% of parents who noted negative reactions in their child.)

I did see differences between parents and Scholars in their remarks on the possibility that the awards would create additional pressure to achieve. Only 19% of the parents thought that their child may be subject to increased pressure, while a majority of Scholars mentioned this possibility. It may be that parents see the word as having negative connotations as did the framers of the questionnaire while Scholars, as we noted earlier, sometimes interpret it positively.

Parents and Scholars appear to be equally aware that prestigious awards for achievement bestowed upon one sibling can add burdens, at least temporarily, to the others. Approximately one-fourth of the respondents in both groups noted this problem.
Parents views on their childrens' motivation also tend to agree with those of the Scholars. In both groups 52% saw the family as a major source of motivation. Moreover, intrinsic motivation was identified by 73% of the parents, as compared to 65% of the Scholars.

In sum, we feel that the parents, as a group, view their child's achievements very positively, are actively involved in encouraging achievement, and are aware of most of their child's feelings. The one area in which parents may have something of a "blindspot" is the child's feeling that he or she must now go on to prove him/herself worthy of past recognition.

Concluding Observations

- The parents and Scholars who participated in the surveys are congruent in their positive attitudes about education, learning and achievement.

- Overwhelmingly, both groups are happily willing to participate in further studies because of their respect for the Presidential Scholars' Awards, their commitment to education and their eagerness to share ideas and insights with new found peers.

- A follow-up, after perhaps six months of college, would give the Scholars a chance to report more considered reactions to their Awards in the contest of larger groups of able students and of emerging career plans. For it is clear that the Scholars would value an opportunity to share their next experiences and continue to learn from their new friends.

- A follow-up of parents at a similar interval would capture insights on the longer term effects on the Awards, particularly on siblings.

- Parents felt that a seminar or workshop in future years would be most valuable, and offered supportive suggestions for its timing and content.

Further Comments from Parents

...I just wish more people knew what a Presidential Scholars is--even our school superintendent didn't know!!
So many well meaning friends and relatives have shown displeasure in Sue's university choice and career pursuits. After she came to receive the many scholarships and the 1985 Presidential Scholar Award, people turned full circle and accepted her honest desire to be a TEACHER and go to a university located in her own state of Iowa.

Natalie has always shown an eagerness for learning and a curiosity for new concepts. Her strong inner drive and quiet aggressiveness have been reinforced, we feel, by our constant encouragement and by many of her teacher's support. Possibly her parents and older brother showing great enjoyment in reading fostered her early fascination with the written word; perhaps also being witness to her mother studying for her college courses contributed to this interest. An important factor in developing her abilities was her enrollment in a program for Gifted Children when it was started in elementary school.

Friends and relatives who possess self-confidence love Ryan. Insecure people, even teachers, tend to be resentful. Gifted people carry the burden of rarely being forgiven if they unknowingly offend someone. I could write pages on the experience Ryan has had "relating."

Though we felt proud of my son's achievement, we wished the procedure of selecting Presidential Scholars had been shortened. Suspension and anxiety lasted almost half a year.

We are extremely proud of our son and so is his school and community. We can't think of one negative thing that has come from receiving this award.

Steph has received a number of recognitions in the past year...Most of these are done through the mail, so no one ever meets their "competition"...Presidential Scholars opened the door to "Salute to Excellence Weekend" where she met many of the Scholars and other achieving young people, as well as outstanding adults. Through this opportunity to meet other award winners, the "imagined others" finally became real. That is a very valuable exercise in comparison-contrast: endowment, training, personalities, family background, experiences, values, variety, and on and on. Sometimes the result is quiet self-satisfaction—sometimes a challenge to her own values and background.
...I believe our children's greatest motivation came from their knowledge, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that they were loved, by God and by family.

...Victoria has no particular motivation other than to do her best. Unfortunately, she does not have to work hard in order to be the best.

...We were proud to have our daughter receive this award. It was made more valuable because it was awarded by a committee completely independent of local pressures.

...Our community has been wonderfully generous in its commendation of Norris. The entire school system has been grateful because his achievement has provided some leverage with a penny-pinching county budget system.

...He felt very proud of himself, but at the same time he was very grateful to all those around him who had helped him. He knew he had not achieved all this alone for himself.

...When this award was announced in school assembly, the entire student body rose to a standing ovation--there is great respect not just for Mary but for the award itself and a shared pride in her. This was the nicest and most touching part of all.

...I am fairly neutral, but my husband takes exception to the whole subject of "Gifted Children." He never thought of our children as such, even though they might be perceived so in conventional terms. He believes that the whole concept leads to an ego trip for the parents and is a disservice, in many cases, to the youngster when he is treated as special or pampered, not expected to buckle down and do regular work with the rest of the group. Performance and hard work are infinitely preferable to the "gifted" label. When our kids are treated as being special, they are quickly brought back to earth and shown how much they don't know. Mozart, maybe Einstein, were gifted, but the rest are hard working.

The following suggested topics for next year's parents' seminar are from a parent who is a former college teacher. She writes from both perspectives.

...How to help the gifted child acquire the discipline needed in college. Many high achievers in high school are used to "putting out" an effort but the truly gifted
child is used to coasting. My daughter hardly ever even studied. She used her time to explore whole areas of interest, such as reading all she could about Abraham Lincoln or the history of Russia, but I am concerned about her ability to acquire study habits when she is finally challenged.

How to deal with the depression that inevitably occurs in kids who think about the world situation and about issues like terrorism, pollution, and disarmament.

How to evaluate the honors curriculum at colleges and assess the value of special programs or living arrangements—such as teacher/student ratios, the credentials of the professor as opposed to the teaching assistants who teach regular introductory classes, etc.

How to help the gifted student adjust to starting fresh as one of the crowd, without the benefit of the "halo effect" from high school achievements.

How to help the child cope with incompetent teachers for whom she has no respect; how to see the adjustment to disliked teachers in a less than personal perspective, as part of the learning process and as an opportunity for some sort of growth.

How to pull strings in a college to tailor a program that is challenging and satisfying—is such as getting permission to register for 21 hours and then dropping back one or two classes after perusing the courses and the instructors or how to get a counselor who is aware and open to the special needs of gifted children.

How to confront ethical issues and value so that the gifted student realizes that along with his superb mental abilities goes the responsibility to use these powers for the improvement of mankind and the benefit of fellow human beings.
To the Parents and Guardians of the 1985 Presidential Scholars:

Your child has received an award that reflects his or her outstanding ability and achievement. This honor, as well as others your child may have been given, no doubt elicited powerful reactions in you and your family.

Your comments on the following questions will be very helpful to people interested in the development of gifted and talented young people. Please attach pages as needed for your response.

1. Please describe your own thoughts and feelings about your child's achievement and his or her receiving this particular award. (Depending on your own experience, discuss the positive side such as possible pride or motivation, as well as potentially negative aspects such as pressure, expectations or embarrassment.)

2. Please describe, without discussing it with your child, what you think your child really feels about achievement and about recognition.

3. Please discuss the positive and/or negative impacts of your child's achievement and recognition on you and other members of your family, friends and others.

4. What do you see as the source(s) of your child's motivation?

5. Where you in Washington with your Presidential Scholar? Yes No (circle one)

6. Did you attend the parent workshop Thursday afternoon? Yes No (circle one)

If yes, please share any comments that may help in determining whether or how to repeat such a session.

7. If a more extended study of such questions develops, would you be willing to participate? Yes No (circle one)

Name ____________________

Address ____________________

(Please return to The American Association for Gifted Children at the address above.)
Presidential Scholars 1985:

As a 1985 Presidential Scholar, you have received an award that reflects your outstanding ability and achievement. This honor, as well as others you may have had, no doubt elicited powerful reactions in you and your family.

Your comments on the following questions will be very helpful to people interested in the development of gifted and talented young people. Please feel free to attach pages as needed for your response.

1. Please describe your real thoughts and feelings about your achievement and being the recipient of this and other recognition. (Depending on your own experience, discuss the positive side such as possible pride in yourself or encouragement to do more, as well as potentially negative aspects such as continued pressure, expectations or embarrassment.)

2. Please discuss the positive and/or negative impact of your achievement and recognition on other members of your family, friends and others.

3. What do you see as the source(s) of your motivation?

4. We plan to follow-up on the progress that a sample of you are making in six months. Would you be willing to participate in this study? Yes No (circle one)

Name __________________________________________

Address ________________________________________

(Please return to The American Association for Gifted Children at the address above.)
The American Association for Gifted Children
15 Gramercy Park
New York, New York 10003

Presidential Scholars 1985:

As the Presidential Scholars program begins its third decade, the following factual information will be especially valuable since we have similar data from the earliest recipients.

What is the population of the town where you live?

How many students are in your school's graduating class?

What is your rank in class?

What is your verbal SAT score? Your math SAT score?

Are you a Presidential Scholar in the Arts?

How many brothers and sisters do you have?

What is your own birth order? First? Second? Third? Fourth?

What is the highest school grade completed by your mother? _______
your father? _______

Are your parents living? mother _______ father _______

Do you reside with: both parents? mother? father? guardian?

What are your parents' occupations? mother _______ father _______

What is your probable college major?

What is your probable career?

(Please return to The American Association for Gifted Children at the address above.)