

## Enrichment and Acceleration Experiences

# Preparing High-Ability Students for College: Enrichment and Acceleration Experiences



By Tyler Clark, Ed.D., Julia Link Roberts, Ed.D., and Lynette Breedlove, Ph.D.

**H**igh-ability students often begin thinking about their college experiences earlier than other students. Berger recommended that students begin planning for college as early as seventh grade.<sup>1</sup> For students to best plan for their college experiences, including what they want to study, where they want to attend, and how they want to structure their learning experiences, they need exposure to diverse opportunities and ideas to inform their decisions. Some options available include summer programs, online classes, study abroad opportunities, or experiences conducting innovative and rigorous research.

### Summer Programs

Summer programs offer new and diverse experiences for students to explore a variety of topics. Families may find many summer opportunities in their areas offered by school districts, museums, art and science centers, as well as theaters. Often the most robust programming for highly able students is offered by universities and community colleges. For example, The Center for Gifted Studies at

Western Kentucky University (WKU) has options for students completing grades 6–10 to live on a college campus and take classes with other high-ability students in an academically challenging environment that allows them to explore new or existing academic interests. For example, students may choose to sample courses about Greek mythology, geometry, or poetry. Other students may decide to focus on one area and take a full year of chemistry or explore

various writing styles.<sup>2</sup> There are several other programs around the country that also allow students to explore a variety of interests; some allow students to take multiple courses while others focus on a specific area such as economics, art, or physics. Regardless of their structure, university summer programs allow students to explore topics of interest in depth and at an accelerated rate. Often, these courses are not available to students

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in their local schools until later in their academic careers or they may never be offered for exploration. Summer programs help students learn more about what they want to explore further in college, and many offer students the opportunity to live on a university campus, giving them a taste of college life and providing a real context for college planning. Living on a college campus for a few weeks helps students consider the different aspects of a living-learning environment they want to prioritize as they build their college lists. For example, are they comfortable on a large campus or would they prefer a smaller one? What residence hall layout might they prefer? What skills do they need to develop to live in a close-knit community and with a roommate?

In some cases, summer courses through universities and community colleges allow students to begin earning college credit. These credits can help students meet general education requirements earlier so they can begin higher level courses in their interest areas when attending college full time. Many of these programs have a cost associated with them; however, financial

assistance is often available based upon financial need. It is important for parents to contact the sponsoring organizations to inquire about financial assistance. The program itself may have funding available or know about local businesses or organizations that may provide financial assistance to students.

Online classes in the summer can also prepare students for college. Students may choose to take an accelerated math course online to be able to move to a higher level during the next school year. Other students may decide to take a course that may not be regularly offered in their school such as AP Physics. There are also enrichment classes students might enjoy starting in middle school, such as those offered by OnlineG3. Learning in college is often quite different from learning in K-12 schools. In college, students are responsible for monitoring their own learning. Rather than the teacher providing multiple ways to interact with content, students are expected to use a variety of study skills that fit their personal needs. When they have questions or do not understand concepts, students are expected to take the

initiative to ask questions and seek help. Online summer classes require similar skills.<sup>3</sup> Students must have the personal motivation to stay on track, investigate further when they have questions, and reach out for assistance.

### Study Abroad

Study abroad opportunities offer multiple ways to learn because they are immersive. For example, the Center for Gifted Studies at WKU offers two international programs each year for students in grades 8–12, as well as interested adults. Recent programs have visited Italy and England with highlights such as Pompeii, the Colosseum, Stonehenge, and Shakespeare's Globe. These are places students often read about, but traveling to the actual location provides a more enriching experience for them. The Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science (Gatton) also provides study abroad opportunities for its students. Gatton students may conduct biology research in the cloud forest in Costa Rica or read Charlotte Brontë and visit the Yorkshire moors in England to better understand the stories.



When traveling, students learn about other cultures, specific content related to the program's focus, and themselves. Students gain confidence as they navigate daily life in another country while absorbing the program's focused content, getting to know the culture of their host location, and most importantly learning about perspectives that often differ from their own. These skills translate to preparing for college as attending university requires students to be exposed to new cultures and multiple perspectives.

### Research Experiences

Authentic and rigorous research experiences allow students to learn about their interests in conducting research and in particular concepts. For example, Gatton provides opportunities for students in the program at WKU to conduct research with university faculty from a variety of disciplines. These experiences allow students to explore topics of interest deeply and see the research side of the topic. This early exposure gives high school students valuable information about whether the topic is something they want to continue exploring

after enrolling in college and how they may want to approach the topic, whether it be from a continued research perspective or shifting to a more practice-based experience with the subject. A recent study of Gatton alumnae highlighted just this as women in computer science recounted how their research experiences helped them make college and career choices.<sup>4</sup> Students not attending specialized programs offering research opportunities may reach out to faculty at local universities to discuss getting involved in research. Reviewing faculty profiles on websites can be helpful for learning about what type of research is being conducted. There are also summer research opportunities offered across the country. Many have competitive application processes, so planning to prepare a strong application is important. NYCSR Consortium offers multiple opportunities for research and STEM internships across New York City. Spark Summer Internship Program provides opportunities for students in the Seattle area. In addition, Lumiere Education provides mentored research opportunities for students in many different disciplines across the country.

Summer programs, online courses, study abroad, and research provide high-ability students a wide range of opportunities for enrichment and acceleration that can assist them in their college planning. These experiences facilitate students' exploration of topics of interest, development of independent learning skills, and interaction with others who have similar interests yet differing perspectives. Taking advantage of any of these opportunities can prepare young people for the transition to college. 💡

### Resources

- The Center for Gifted Studies at WKU: <https://wku.edu/gifted>
- The Gatton Academy of Mathematics and Science in Kentucky: <https://www.wku.edu/academy/>
- NAGC's Gifted and Talented Resources Directory: <https://giftedandtalentedresourcesdirectory.com/>
- Online G3: <https://www.onlineg3.com/>
- BYU Independent Study: <https://is.byu.edu/>

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Stanford Middle School Scholars Program:

<https://spcs.stanford.edu/programs/stanford-middle-school-scholars-program>

NYCSR Consortium: <https://www.studentresearchnyc.org/>

Spark SIP: <https://www.sparksmip.org/>

Lumiere Education: <https://www.lumiere-education.com/>

### Authors' Notes

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Berger, S. L. (2014). *College planning for gifted students*. Prufrock.

<sup>2</sup> Roberts, J. L., Clark, T., Makel, M., & Pei, M. (2023). Making choices for summer programming. *Parenting for High Potential*, 12(2), 4–8.

<sup>3</sup> Bright, S., & Calvert, E. (2023). Educational technology: Barrier or bridge to equitable access to advanced learning opportunities? *Gifted Child Today*, 46(3), 187–200.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10762175231168711>

<sup>4</sup> Clark, T., Akdeniz, H., Roberts, J. L., & Breedlove, L. (in press). Impacts of a residential STEM program on increasing interest in computer science careers for gifted female students. *Gifted Education International*.

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