Tribute to
Halbert B. Robinson
(1925-1981)

At the Fifteenth Anniversary
Commemoration and
Renaming of the Center for
the Study of Capable Youth
to be the Halbert Robinson
Center for the Study of
Capable Youth,
University of Washington,

By Julian C. Stanley

We are together today to
rededicate the result of a
most innovative idea that
Hal and Nancy Robinson
had in the early 1970s. My Study of
Mathematically Precocious Youth
(SMPY) was in its infancy then. Hal and
Nancy dared to be more radical
educationally than even we of SMPY.
That both approaches, theirs and mine,
have persisted for almost 2 decades and
inspired numerous related projects
across the nation is testimony to the
great educational needs that intellec-
tually talented boys and girls and their
parents felt then and still feel.

Hal was my good friend, professional
and personal. I grieved when he died
tragically in a scuba-diving accident in
Yucatan. The field of giftedness and I
have felt his loss keenly. Fortunately,
his exceedingly capable wife, Nancy,
also my close friend, has kept the flame
of educational excellence brightly lit.
She has moved from being one of the
foremost workers in the area of mental
retardation to becoming one of the
most outstanding advocates for high-
ability youths. In this she follows the
path of one of the two principal
founders of the gifted-child movement,
Professor Leta S. Hollingworth of
Columbia University. Like Hal, Leta
died prematurely, she at age 83. Her
intensive work at Columbia from 1914
until her death in 1939 laid, along with
that of Lewis M. Terman in California,
firm foundations for attention to the
gifted. Similarly, her spouse lessened
some of his sorrow by loving attention
to the completion of her unfinished
work and to the preparation of her
biography (L. Hollingworth, 1942; H.
Hollingworth, 1943).*

Nancy and Hal, I salute you for your
steadfastness to the cause of talent, to
the prevention of what the poet

Thomas Gray called the “mute, inglor-
ious Miltons” buried in the village
graveyard. (This reminds me of the
story about a man who had lived an
exceptionally good life, died, and gone
to heaven. St. Peter met him and, as a
reward for the man’s virtue, offered to
introduce him to anyone in heaven
whom he especially admired. The man
thought for a moment and then asked
to see the greatest general who had
ever lived. St. Peter brought a wizened
little fellow. The new initiate to heaven
was astounded and protested, “I knew
this man well. He was only a humble
cobbler in my home town.” “Yes,” said
St. Peter, “but if he had been a general,
he would have been the best the world
has ever known.”)

Nearly 2½ centuries ago, in his
exquisite “Elegy Written in a Country
Churchyard,” Gray succinctly sum-
marized the essence of my work and
that of the Robinsons:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean
bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush
unseen,
And waste its sweetness on the desert
air.

During World War II, I saw many
personnel records, and informally com-
pared Army General Classification
Test (AGCT) scores, an approximate
measure of intelligence, with soldiers’
educational and occupational back-
grounds. It became obvious to me that
some of the top scorers had missed the
educational and vocational boats badly.
For example, the highest-scoring en-
listed man in our bomber command
headquarters, located on Corsica, was
a 30-year-old, high-school-graduate,
Connecticut resident who in civilian life
had been a postal clerk. On the AGCT
he scored far above a Yale University
PhD degree recipient in the humanities
and a New York lawyer in the group. It
occurred to me vaguely even then, in
1944, that, to update Gray’s immortal
words, “Many brilliant persons will not
have their intellectual potentialities
recognized and nurtured properly.”
What if these individuals’ high scores
had been known earlier and formed a
basis for maximizing the effective
utilization of their abilities? I resolved —
rather dimly at the time in the wilds of

*A 1990 reprint edition of Leta Hollingsworth’s
biography, with a foreword by Ludy T. Benjamin,
Jr. and Stephanie A. Shields and a bibliography
of publications about her, is available from the
Anker Publishing Co., P.O. Box 249, Bolton, MA
01740.
Correlates

The last paper Hal ever published, entitled “A Case for Radical Acceleration: Programs of the Johns Hopkins University and the University of Washington,” appeared in 1983 in a volume that Camilla Benbow, now at Iowa State University, and I edited. It was based on his presentation at a symposium held in Baltimore only a few months before Hal’s untimely death, the last time I ever saw him (Robinson, 1983). We are quite fortunate to have Hal’s analysis and comparison of those two programs and cogent arguments favoring extreme educational acceleration of certain unusually able boys and girls. SMPY, begun in 1971, was followed 2 years later by the establishment of the Robinson’s Child Development Research Group at the University of Washington. In 1977, the Radical Acceleration Group of the Early Entrance Program started there with two students. It has grown considerably since then. Even by 1981 there were 20 students in the program. As Hal stated, “To qualify for admission to the EEP a student must be 14 years old or younger and/or not yet in the 10th grade, have demonstrated high academic achievement, and have attained scores on the Washington Precollege Test . . . that compare favorably with those of high school juniors who subsequently enter 4-year colleges.” Thus he defined “radical accelerant” as a student who has been moved forward quite a few school grades beyond most of his or her agemates. SMPY started out with a similar frame of reference but gradually changed from grade acceleration to specific subject-matter acceleration as we managed to devise various ways for high-ability students to move ahead faster and better in mathematics and related subjects but increase the breadth of their learning in other areas. Some youths benefit more from the Robinson approach, some more from the SMPY one. Both approaches, and many others, are needed.

The Robinsons’ systematic attention to educational acceleration was in a half-century tradition, starting with Termann at Stanford University around 1921 and Hollingworth at Columbia University about the same time and culminating in the 1920s and 1930s at the University of Chicago under its innovative president, Robert Maynard Hutchins. Long before that, however, there were sporadic instances of extremely early entrance to college. Increase Mather, a famous preacher and the father of Cotton Mather, had graduated from Harvard College in 1659 at age 16. James Fenimore Cooper, renowned author, entered Yale College by examination at age 13 but was dismissed 2 years later because of a “boyish prank.” The celebrated cyberneticist (he coined the term) Norbert Wiener had graduated from Tufts College before World War I, Phi Beta Kappa, at age 14, and received his PhD degree from Harvard at age 18. Soon thereafter the later-ill-fated Williams James Sidis graduated from Harvard at age 15. Charles Homer Haskins graduated from Johns Hopkins University in 1887 at age 16, received his PhD degree there at age 19, and went on to become an eminent medieval historian and dean of the graduate school at Harvard. Over the years the small graduating classes at Johns Hopkins have contained a total of 49 persons who completed all requirements for the bachelor’s degree before their 19th birthday.

The country’s youngest college graduates seem to be Adragon DiMello at age 11, but under perhaps doubtful circumstances; Jay Luo, at age 12 years, 45 days; Sam Ho, a graduate of the Robinson’s Early Entrance Program, at age 13, years 11 months; and Merrill Kenneth Wolf, from Yale Uni-
junior-high-school student! Jay Luo continued on to earn a master's degree in mathematics at Stanford University before his 13th birthday. He completed almost a graduate academic year in mathematics and a master's degree in computer science at the University of California at Santa Cruz and then became a full-time private teacher. Merrill Kenneth Wolf studied musical keyboard instruments (piano, harpsichord, organ, etc.) privately for 7 years before entering medical school only a year younger than the typical medical student. He is an outstanding professor of neuroanatomy in a state medical school and plays the piano beautifully as an avocation.

Of these four youngest, only Sam participated in a systematic acceleration program. There have been many such programs. The most systematic and longest continued was Chicago’s, followed for a number of years later by Shimer College in Mt. Carroll, Illinois, which now seems to be defunct. The only college devoted almost exclusively to admitting younger-than-typical students is coeducational Simon’s Rock College of Bard. Located in rural Massachusetts, it enrolls chiefly students 1 or 2 years accelerated; many of them lack high school diplomas. Johns Hopkins does not require its freshmen to have received a high school diploma, so historically right on down to the present it has had a number of entering students, 12% or so, a year or more accelerated. Mary Baldwin College in Virginia admits young girls to study along with regular-age female students. It is not coeducational. That program seems to be the only one in the United States closely paralleling the Robinsons’ Early Entrance Program with respect to the extreme youth of all the entrants.

During the 1970s The Clarkson School originated at Clarkson Institute of Technology (now Clarkson University) in New York State. Its students consist entirely of 12th graders. They live together on the campus and interact socially with each other, but take only college courses. At the end of the year the academically successful ones receive a high school diploma but have also completed a year of college work. In 1988, at the University of North Texas, the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science (TAMS) was created, to serve intellectually advanced 11th and 12th graders from all over Texas. Eighty-nine 10th-grade graduates entered that fall and produced the first graduating class last June. In 1989 there were 90 such students entering, and 190 in 1990. Plans call for admitting 200 each fall. TAMS differs from the Clarkson School in that it continues for 2 years instead of one, has mostly required courses (two semesters each of college biology, calculus, chemistry, and physics, and at least 24 semester hours of humanities and social sciences), and restricts its enrollment to Texans. Its successful students complete 4 years of schooling in 2, emerging as college juniors.

The TAMS model is quite different from the several state-supported residential high schools such as the 2-year North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics or the 3-year Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (Stanley, in press). They have advanced courses for their ablest students, but these do not usually carry college credit. High achievement in such courses may lead to excellent scores on the relevant Advanced Placement Program examinations and thereby help the examinee gain some college credit. (See Brody & Stanley, in press.)

Summing Up

Intellectually talented boys and girls sorely need the option to choose among as many different special educational opportunities as can possibly be provided for them. Most of these programs should involve intensive and extensive association with their true intellectual peers who, preferably, are approximately their own age. The prerequisite for all this is early identification of persons who have great potential to move ahead faster in certain academic areas than most of their agemates can.

There are many so-called “enrichment” programs all over the United States, but far too few that help eliminate the boredom and frustration bright students feel in some of their regular classes. For example, even the best social studies discussion during a 2-hour pull-out program each week for gifted children does nothing to lessen the boredom a highly math-talented student feels almost every day in an algebra class that is, for him or her, snail-paced.

Conclusion

We see, then, that Hal’s and Nancy’s vision was inspired. They have gone considerably beyond anyone else in advocating and providing extreme grade-level acceleration to intellectually brilliant young students who crave the opportunity to break completely with the standard age-in-grade lock step and are able enough to do so. The subsequent records of many of their graduates attest to the validity and robustness of the model. Thus, in Hal’s memory I say, asHoratio said when Hamlet died, “...good night, sweet prince; And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!” Your legacy is secure. By bearing your name henceforth, this Center will herald to the world the beneficent influence of a great mind and an altruistic spirit. That is true immortality, beyond one’s germ plasm, and even beyond the visions of most theologians and mystics.

References


