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"A Shock to Study"

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Learning about the experience of living in a state-funded, public residential high school for academically talented children was the purpose of an ethnographic inquiry. Studying and homework dominated the students' lives throughout the year. Eager academically gifted high school students were "shocked" to meet the homework demands of a rigorous academic program. The general story of doing homework is told, as well as four characteristic patterns of adjustment presented as cases of studying in action. Theoretical issues related to talent development are discussed.

Adjusting to the Shock of Studying: Four Stories

Learning from the students' perspective what it is like to enter and live within an academically rigorous program was the goal of this qualitative naturalistic study of a residential public high school for the gifted. The purpose of this paper is to tell the story of how gifted students experienced the academic requirements, or more specifically, one such demand: homework. The term—*shock*—in the title of this paper captures the initial response many students had to this environment. Most of this paper describes how students adjusted to doing homework from their perspective as part of living in this particular program.

The idea for the paper appeared when I was considering the answers to a phenomenological-type question I had asked students: "Tell me what stands out in your mind about the experience of being at the Greenhouse Institute?"[1] One repeated phrase was "shock." That response moved me toward investigating what was shocking. I discovered that much of the life of the school could be linked to homework and studying.

Theoretical Perspective

Two theoretical perspectives are advanced in this study: a general theory and a personal theory. A nascent general theory of talent development with variations can be gleaned from the work of scholars (Bloom, 1985; Feldman, 1994; Gagné, 1999) that postulates development as occurring within the context of domains or disciplines over a relatively long period of education in which the person steadfastly is involved in his or her own growth. One postulated benchmark is the commitment of oneself to the development of one's talent. In an incremental, perhaps unconscious, manner, more and more activity and thought is devoted to learning and practicing the talent. The students in this school were selected for general academic talent with special attention given to the sciences and humanities. In this setting, students' motivation to learn is assumed. An indirect indicator of growing commitment to their academic talent may be students' ability to handle the demands of homework and studying. This paper documents how this happened in one special program.

My personal theoretical perspective also informs this study. I have argued that we should look more closely at the development of talent in settings in which we know talent is nurtured (Coleman, 1995). These settings could be schools like Juilliard, clubs like a local chess club, or centers like the Midwest Talent Search or Olympic Village. I contend that the conventional notion that a person develops his or her talent in isolation spurred on by some mysterious inner drive downplays the more important experience of being in the right place at the right time for developing that talent (see indirect examples in Rena Subotnik's "Conversation With the Masters"series in various

issues of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*). Instead, my view maintains that various cognitive and affective experiences relative to a talent domain, such as commitment, tacit knowledge, networking, modeling, and so forth, are acquired in the special setting. One crucial aspect for the emergence of high levels of talent is an increasing level of commitment. Significantly, the commitment develops in special settings where the talent is taught, refined, and practiced. Talent is unlikely to grow in a neutral general setting such as most classrooms. This study enters a specialized environment and reports what happens with academic talent.

Placing gifted and talented children in rigorous academic schools is one of the options a family might exercise for the education of their child. I have heard anecdotes describing such decisions. Unfortunately, parents find relatively little practical information from systematic study of life in such settings. This paper begins to fill that void. By increasing our understanding of those environments, families can make better-informed choices about enrolling their children. In addition, this study may serve to provide program builders, administrators, and other professionals with information on what happens in special programs.

Research on Homework

Homework is a part of school life, and much has been written about it in the popular press and in the academic literature. Since 1988, the amount of homework seems to have increased in schools (Corno, 2000; Roderique, Polloway & Cumblad, 1994). The correlation between time spent on homework and achievement in high school students is small (Cooper, 2001). The actual amount of time students report devoting to homework is difficult to measure because doing homework is not the same as being "appropriately engaged" in homework (Corno, 1996). In addition, many factors, such as family background, culture, school, ability, and so forth, influence student behavior in a myriad of ways. The result is that we know little of substance about this common academic event. Searching the literature more specifically, I found no direct data on homework in a special educational setting for the gifted. The literature does little to prepare us to understand what happens in a special school with a rigorous academic curriculum.

Methodology

The use of phenomenological questions was part of a larger ethnographic inquiry over one academic year extending from orientation to graduation. During that time, I gathered 100 days of field notes, conducted dozens of spontaneous and semi-structured interviews, and collected documents. On some days, I attended classes; on others, I shadowed students with their permission or attended various community functions. For some of the time, I lived in the dorm and participated with my floor mates in the typical activities of the school. After 3 months of participant observation, I conducted semistructured interviews with a purposeful sample of 4 juniors and 4 seniors on a monthly basis. In these interviews, I progressively narrowed my attention to questions about homework and studying. In addition, I constructed a questionnaire of sorts that asked students to indicate how they spent their time in order to corroborate some of my observations. In all instances, my intention was to learn about the experience of being a student in a special setting. The methodology was the same as for the larger study, and this paper reports one of the major themes.

The data were analyzed using the principles of grounded theory (Glazer & Strauss, 1967) with heavy influence from Peshkin (1986, 1991), as well as insight gained from reading other scholars. Over the course of the year, I organized field notes and wrote memos. At the end of each month, I created plans for the next month, when I was away from the Greenhouse Institute. A folder was created to hold emerging themes as the analysis proceeded. I taught myself NUD*IST as I began to code the field notes, transcripts, and documents within that system. The responses to the phenomenological questions mentioned earlier propelled me toward the topic of studying and homework. Coleman (2001) supplies more specific details about the methodology of the study, and that paper sets the social context of the Greenhouse Institute in more detail than is described here.

The Setting and the Participants

The Greenhouse Institute (GI) is a public, residential high school for 300 juniors and seniors who are residents of the state. The 2-year program offers an enriched and accelerated curriculum in science, math, and the humanities. GI's mission is to "provide a healthy and challenging residential community for eleventh- and twelfth-grade students of high academic ability who are committed to reaching their full potential within a holistic framework" (Greenhouse Institute, p. 1). The school is housed on a university campus. GI has dorms and classrooms separate from most of the campus. Dining facilities are shared with one university dorm.

The students are selected through an application process that includes standardized test data (e.g., PSAT), essays, and recommendations. A panel invites some applicants to come to the school. The student body represents academically talented children from across the state. Graduates from the program go to the most prestigious private and public colleges, as well as

other secondary programs fitting their interests. Graduates report that GI was more rigorous than the prestigious schools they are attending.

Students complete the equivalent of a high school honors diploma and must meet the requirements of the Greenhouse Institute. The typical schedule at GI has most courses on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays with Tuesdays and Thursdays reserved for specialized courses and science and language labs. Classes begin at 8:00 a.m. and run all day until 5:00 p.m. Most students are done by 4:00 p.m. and there are a few evening classes. A state university class may also be taken. Of course, all of this is mitigated by the nature of the particular courses and the teachers' styles. The weekend is free from classes, although planned activities are available for those who want them. One-third to one-half of the students opt to go home for the weekend, a choice that is influenced by proximity of home to GI and the income level of the family. Approximately once a month there is an extended weekend where classes end on Thursday and students can go home for a long weekend. Obviously, student schedules vary widely. The basic consideration when thinking of students' lives is that their schedule determines much of what they do on any given day.

Results

What is Shocking?

The selective group of students at GI expect the academics to be more difficult. Having that expectation does not prepare them for the Greenhouse Institute and the regimen associated with a rigorous academic program. The initial feeling of "shock" that students experience originates in the sharp departure from prior experience and is amplified by the nature of GI. The shock is that homework takes time, is ever present, and is never quite finished. Their local high schools called for little or no studying. "There was just no homework really" (a junior). Most students claim they did not have homework or did not have to study at their home schools. GI is different. Everyone studies more. One has to in order to stay in school. A junior explained what it meant to be at the school for her and for others, too:

> It's so serious and you have to work to get all this done. You have to have an honors diploma, you have to work a lot harder to get good grades. At home, I never did it. I did all my homework in class and I got straight As. Here, I do homework and I study and I get mostly Bs. You know, you have to work a lot harder; it's more stressful. And so the ability just to go out, have fun, leave school and not have to worry about homework, about what's due the next day, and about how many papers are due that week, you know?

Notice in the statement two changes in her life are implied. The first change is homework becomes a major presence and is "so serious." The amount of studying increases beyond expectations for most. The second change is the balance between social and academic routines of high school life. One's past pattern of attention to friends and nonacademic interests is distorted by the worry over completing homework for the next day and further. How one spends time, what one does in the course of a day, and how one thinks about homework changes, too (see Huang, 1998). Together, these changes coalesce, yielding an initial feeling of shock. The shock lessens as the year progresses and students learn to deal with GI life. But, some feelings remain unsettled because "the inescapable problem of coming from an environment where homework was much less and the urge to socialize" is endemic to a place like the Greenhouse Institute (a male senior).

Having to Do Homework Is Only Part of the Story

Having to do homework is mildly shocking. That feeling is magnified by the realization that knowing how to study is not a set of skills many possess. Many students find learning how to study to be more upsetting than the amount of homework.

> I had the worst time learning how to study because it was just something I had never done. I'd not read, not do homework, just pay attention in class and get As on tests. And that was like school for me until I got here. And I was like, a paper!? Why would I have to write a paper!? Or do homework!? (a female senior)

Welcoming studying is a less frequent reaction. Seniors expressed this thought more clearly than juniors. Recognizing that they liked the challenge shocked them, too. Some arrived at GI as successful students who had lost or put aside their early interest in learning. In a focus group, seniors reported that the challenging nature of homework that required thinking rekindled their interest in learning for its own sake.

Where and When Does Studying and Doing Homework Happen?

The studying and homework that takes place is constrained by the GI environment. The time one is free and the locations that are open based on school rules influence how students approach studying. Where and when to study is also

influenced by the subject matter. In this section, I present the predominance of time and place; in the following section I add the ingredient of subject matter.

Students study or do homework at all times of the day, night, and weekend. Some have different preferences or default choices as to when they study. To understand studying routines, the official schedule must be recalled. Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday are intense homework and study days because they precede days with the most classes. Classes end by 4:00 p.m. Between then and going to eat (which may be at dining services, in your room, or out of the building), GIs are expected to check in with their Residence Counselor (RC). This is to reoccur before 6:30 p.m., when mandatory study session begins. At 8:00 p.m., study session ends. Subsequent activities may be a continuation of the study session in that studying and homework carries forward either in a student's own room, a friend's room, or someplace in the Village (a local strip of eateries and shops near the university), or in a faculty office. Many students leave their rooms to engage in actions other than studying. Some roam their side of the dorm or the lounges, or they go out, usually to walk around. A small number sneak away to smoke. Some go to the gym to lift weights or play a game. These 2 hours represent a major time to socialize because most everyone is free and near the dorm. By 10:00 and 10:30 p.m., junior and seniors, respectively, must return to the dorm. Then, until 12:30 a.m., students choose to study or socialize. Students can move around the dorm with RC permission. Many study sporadically during this period. Studying occurs in one's room alone or with friends in the study lounge located on the floor. I encountered little talk of negotiating between roommates about studying. Some continue to "screw around" until 12:30 a.m., when serious homework begins. This is more characteristic of the boys' dorm than the girls' dorm.

Between Classes

When students are not in class, they are usually in their rooms doing homework or sleeping. Many say they do not study during the day, but they do homework. In a small number of instances, students reported having time to do homework in that class. Relatively little homework is done in an earlier class for a later class. Students observe that not doing homework in class for another class is how GI is different, and teachers who taught in typical high schools notice this, too. Exceptions do occur. The major exception was the last-minute completion of homework in a televised course for another class by one student.

Reading is a large part of the total homework load. Some students prefer to leave big blocks of time to read; others read when they can, here and there. One junior reads during 10-minute breaks between classes. "I have ideally, an hour and 50 minutes during the day that I could read, not counting the time before I go to class." I encountered a junior male sneaking into the university student center in the afternoon to find a place to read, acknowledging he was breaking a rule by being in that building. I saw students sitting under a tree reading in the early afternoon. Students also race in and out of the computer lab finishing assignments and checking e-mail.

Study Sessions

Mandated studying, as has been indicated, is a designated time in the daily schedule that lasts from 6:30 until 8:00 p.m. The number of students actually using study session to study is an estimate because the doors to rooms were closed. Students might be sleeping, studying, or listening to music. Based on multiple conversations and living in the dorm, I estimate that about half of the session was spent studying.

Besides the amount of time devoted to studying, estimation of how many people are actually in the study session is tricky because of the numerous exceptions. GI students are busy with nonacademic or pseudoacademic activities, which take time away from studying. Exceptions are granted by RCs, and often with concurrence of the guidance staff, to leave or "postpone" study sessions for music lessons, tutoring or being tutored, sports team practices, and rehearsals. RCs have great discretion in this matter. Another major exception requested by students that was adopted by the administration was officially excusing some seniors from study session. By showing a record of academic success and requesting it, seniors could elect to be excused. Some used this time as an opportunity to eat later, lingering in the dining hall, or to watch TV. I spent time with one mixed group of boys and girls who regularly watched TV shows in a RCs room. Another exception was a RC who pointedly encouraged a student who had been studying obsessively not to study.

Evening and Later Night Studying

Many students stay up as long as needed in order to finish their work. Boys are much more likely to "stay up late" and do homework than girls are. Studying after 2:00 a.m. is the students' definition for "staying up late." A group of senior girls told me that girls do not go to other floors to fool around like boys do; rather, they go to do homework. So, many girls have homework done by midnight when many boys are just starting. One floor in the boys' dorm seemed to take pride in not studying until 12:30 a.m. At the same time, I detected little direct peer pressure about studying, although there may have been a kind of subtle pressure.

Students talk about pulling "all-nighters." The range is from 0–1 to 25–30 per year according to my questionnaire. I

never could get a clear definition of what constituted the properties of an all-nighter. Over meals and in the lounge, I heard descriptions that included getting sleep in the early morning as one of the attributes of the definition. I also woke up to count lights in dorm windows over several nights to see how many people were up. Of course, being up or staying up does not mean someone is studying. In other words, my observations and our conversations did not match. Interestingly, I suspect that some of the gender differences may be associated with expressions of bravado and resistance to the rules in the structured GI environment.

Solitary Studying, Weekend Studying

Studying alone happens frequently, but I am not confident about making an estimate of that activity. I know that students do it as a matter of course in various places and throughout any day. Some students study alone because they feel they need to in order to keep up. Others do because they find it more efficient.

The weekend is primarily for catching up on work that requires a large block of time. At the end of a math class, students were saying, "This is going to be a math weekend." Some students go home to study, claiming that their parents insist on it. Many said they do not study until Sunday night. I suspect there is more studying going on than is admitted. A questionnaire and conversations indicated many instances of variations from the general sentiment. One senior girl said she did her studying over the weekend because "she was too busy the rest of the time." Another senior said she studied one night per weekend. Both of these people were successful GIs by anyone's definition, and neither appeared particularly stressed by the pace of GI life. It is possible that sleeping, eating, and studying boundaries are fuzzy and difficult to classify. For example, in October, my field notes showed one senior boy studying in the lounge on a Sunday morning while the rest of the dorm seemed to be sleeping. A junior boy told me he wakes up at 2:30 p.m. "just spending the day in my room [his roommate has gone home]. I do this every day. I do not like the lounge downstairs and have a lot of homework."

After Studying and Homework

Statements from students on the topic has meaning contrary to common parlance. Rarely are studying and homework really completed. Sometimes homework is done in the sense that "I am ready for tomorrow's classes." Very infrequently can studying really be finished because of long timelines between some assignments and the completion date. A project or presentation is always waiting in the wings. So, to say homework is done or to answer a question about what do you do after homework and studying, one must realize that "after" is an arbitrary point when a student decided for him- or herself that, " I am done" or "I have tomorrow's assignments done." Many report that they never feel like they are finished.

Studying, Homework, and Subject Matter

Factors other than time and place influence patterns of studying and homework behavior, such as the announcement of a test, the relationship with a teacher, the subject matter, and the kind of homework. The latter two, subject matter and kind, are interwoven and are very important in the story of academic life at the Greenhouse Institute.

A realization, 4 months into the study, that there was a deeper story about homework induced a new focusing question in both my interviews and casual conversations: "Are there kinds of homework?" The responses were "Sure," followed by examples. My question helped me understand what had appeared to be an incongruity between study behavior and expression of academic self-identity in the form of "I am a science person," "I am a humanities person," and so forth. I mistakenly assumed that a person who identified with a subject area, such as science, would treat the homework of that domain in a thoughtful, careful way. Instead, I saw repeated instances where the homework was done in a rote, thoughtless way. The key to understanding this situation was the classification of homework and the pace of GI academic life.

Kinds of Homework

Everyone presented a coherent system of homework types, although their categories were not worded exactly the same. Students listed from 3 to 8 types, with the mode being 4. The more categories one had, the more attuned one appeared to be to making fine discriminations among categories. In Table 1, five key terms and associated conditions are summarized. *Busywork* is the type in which the expectation is to produce a set of facts. *Writing homework* is when the expectation is to craft a paper of specific length on a topic of varying complexity. *Reading assignment* is when the expectation is to be prepared to discuss a large number of pages. *Projects*, the fourth type, are when the students are expected to synthesize information and present it usually, but not always, in an oral format. The fifth kind of homework is associated with a particular *time period*—May term—and is unique in that respect. The associated terms are words that were used by students that belong with the more general term in their descriptions of particular assignments or courses.

Searching for variations based on gender, grade level, and junior-seniors revealed no apparent differences. Further, I looked for variance among students based on my perception

of them as successful students in the GI program. Again, no pattern was discernible that suggested there is some common understanding among the students about homework.

Student comments as reported in the column of associated terms hint at a relationship between courses and the way homework is experienced in that curricular area. The Greenhouse curriculum has two grand divisions within the academic program: science and math and humanities. Science and math courses primarily call for busywork homework. Humanity courses require reading homework. Some crossover is evident so that it is incorrect to say a subject requires one kind of homework that is approached in one way. Given that caveat, the predominance of a type in a subject area influences when and how that subject is studied.

Math is busywork, so it is studied in short periods of time when one can easily switch one's attention to an ongoing conversation or to another topic. Much science homework has that same feature, as do computer applications and foreign languages. When the homework switches to lab in science and language, writing is required. That kind of homework tends to be done on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Humanities are loaded with reading homework, which students say requires a larger block of time, oftentimes alone, and calls for thinking. These subjects tend to be done after other homework or on days when time is available during the day. Reading homework also tends to be done later at night when one is sleepy. Clearly, students are making choices about studying and doing homework.

A caveat about studying. Studying and socializing is a commonly combined event where the action switches back and forth. One kind of homework ("busywork") predominates in this period because it enables students to finish quickly, be interrupted while studying, and to suspend deep thinking in order to get the homework done. Examples of studying and socializing are plentiful in my notes. I observed a couple in a coffee shop silently doing homework. Another time I participated with three male students in a role-playing game in which they did homework when waiting for a turn. A third is a story reported by a participant about herself and two female peers sporadically doing homework while discussing classes and boys and requesting music from a DJ on a local radio station.

Table 1

Kinds of Homework

Key Term	Associated Terms and Phrases
Busywork	worksheets, problems, assignment, math, science, foreign language, straightforward, concrete, factual, can do while doing something else, small, quickly done, frequent due dates, collected.
Writing	labs, papers, essay, opinion, science, research, language, humanities, have to think, constant process, not fixed, medium, different sizes, weekly, biweekly, monthly, major.
Reading	textbook, library, humanities, history, civilization, squeeze in spare moments, alone, last to do, daily.
Projects	presentations or creative homework, speeches, lead discussions, long time line, humanities
May term	teacher determined, little, a lot, only in special May courses

From General Pattern to Studying in Action

Knowing the general pattern of studying provides a holistic look at how students do homework. Yet, the general is an incomplete description of how students actually act and think in the course of a day. Based on semistructured interviews, observations, and many casual conversations recorded in my field notes, I discovered four characteristic patterns of adjustment. To understand more deeply how students carry out homework, I have constructed case studies of four junior women. The four patterns appeared late in my analysis as I rechecked my description of the general pattern and looked for exceptions based on gender and year in school. I use one gender to simplify describing the context and because the major difference I could discern between males and females is "screwing around," a phrase referring to boys' behavior in the dorm after 10:00 p.m. In my mind, the characteristic patterns became labels for summarizing them. They are: *taking-it-in-striders*, *defending on the edge*, *socializing over academics*, and *doing the right thing*. Each case shows the student's impression of GI upon arrival, how she met the rigorous schedule and academic demands, her expression of shock and academic difference in her life, and how she dealt with the situation.

Cindy

I met Cindy, a small, athletic, junior with a quick smile, in my first week at GI when I asked her to help me comprehend a sign about the Wellness Program next to which she was standing and talking to another girl. Cindy clearly wanted to be at the Greenhouse Institute, although neither her teachers, nor her guidance counselors were supportive. She made repeated requests to get information about applying.

Her first week at the school was exciting and discomforting. She described herself as "insanely happy" halfway through the year. Interestingly, she wanted to go home the first week after she encountered some joking about her southern accent. When asked what the Greenhouse Institute is like, she replied, "GI is like nothing I have ever experienced before."

Cindy was from a rural community where she learned many of her values. She attributed many of her beliefs and behaviors by saying, "I was brought up that way." Cindy's values propelled her to follow rules; for example, she wouldn't call me Larry like the other students, worked hard, did her best, met deadlines, stayed healthy, and didn't dwell on past errors. She was far from an automaton, however, she recognized unfair rules and bent them. Cindy defined herself as "definitely [a] humanities person." Cindy had a boyfriend, which is not a typical part of the GI experience. They spent time together eating meals and exercising in the gym. Their romance was largely invisible to me. On only one instance did I see an example of adolescent teasing and hugging. In the joint interview I had with them, they could disagree, joke about it, and go on.

Cindy described a typical Monday and Tuesday schedule like this:

> On Monday, I get up at 6:30, after going to bed about 1:00, so I can shower undisturbed. I dress, pack my bag, and go to the dining hall at 7:30 for breakfast. From 8:00 until 1:00 I have five classes. In between physics and Chinese, I drop by the dining hall to pick up a sack lunch. [This requires that she make a special arrangement ahead of time.] At 1:00, I catch a nap in my room. Here, you learn to fall asleep quickly. I wake up in less than an hour in order to go to a 2:00 class. Then, comes American Lit and Civitas. By 4:00, I walk back to the dorm to check e-mail and play a computer "MUD game," the only computer game the girls' play. I check in with my RC by 4:30, talk with her or other kids on the floor, or do a little work. I meet Bill at 5:30 to go to the dining hall. We return around 6:15, passing by the teachers' offices to say hello or ask a question. At 6:30, study session begins. I study pretty much. I like to follow the rules. Changing into comfortable clothes, I sit on my bed. Just before 8:00, I change again in order to go to the gym with Bill to work out for an hour. Returning to the dorm, we sit around until one of us says "Time to go study." I study in my room from 10:00 until 1:00. Tuesday follows a similar pattern that is linked to classes. I have two classes, colloquia, and physics lab. I study during free time. At night, I socialize less because Wednesday is a heavy class day.

Second semester was very similar for her. She belonged to three clubs that met at various times. Cindy was also a tutor for physics and often did that during study session.
Homework was ever present in her life. Cindy tried to do it all, even in the face of a contrary belief:

> 'Cause there's no way you can do all the homework that is assigned. Well, you can't do it all the way you like. I'd like to sit down and take notes and highlight and write down questions for everything I read, but it's not practical at all because I wouldn't have time for papers and I wouldn't have time for worksheets.

Being tired was a fact of her life as she tried to meet all the academic demands. Diet Coke helped her stay awake, and consumption increased toward the end of the semester. "Oh, [laughing] I would feel really bad if I didn't [meet the deadlines]." Her push to meet deadlines and do everything conflicted with her goal of completing the work. Cindy reported a "2-week rhythm" to feeling overloaded:

> Okay, the more tired I get, the longer it takes for me to do things. So, if I had to stay up the night before until 1:00, then it'll take me so much longer the next night. . . . But, I've only had . . . three all-nighters the whole year. And I've only had two sick days—one last semester and one this semester—because of homework overload.

This happened gradually so that she did not really notice it was happening until she was tired. Being overloaded meant she could not handle all the work the way she wanted during that period, yet she met her deadlines. She tended not to ask for extensions because "in my family, you either do it on time or you don't do it at all." But, even Cindy had learned to fake it or not do it. When teachers did not ask for her to hand homework in, she did not always do it. The only time she asked for an extension to complete an assignment occurred when a printer would not work. Her values contributed to her feeling overloaded.

Mary

Mary, wearing a T-shirt, baggy jeans, and a smile, simply walked into my office 2 weeks after I arrived and sat down, apparently wanting to kill some time. I recalled seeing her when I visited her junior research class. "The school is so cool!" she exclaimed. She repeatedly dropped in over the semester, which influenced my choice of her as an informant.

At her home high school, Mary had expected a better curriculum in science: "They had nothing in my little school."

She went on, "I was hoping to find a more diverse environment, which I found!" Yet, she was not sure she wanted it like it is at GI, with the continuous attention to homework and the change in a high school student's life. In her words, "Being at GI is like . . . nothing else. I don't really know how to describe it. Sometimes I absolutely hate it and I don't want to be here and then there's other times, like when I go home and I want to come back so bad." Later, "Everything happens so quickly [here]. . . . You'll go through a chapter in a week, and at home it would have taken 2 weeks. Everything's just sped up."

She liked the variety of biology courses. Mary identified herself in this way: "I love the life sciences. I am a life science person." When asked in the first month how she found time to do everything, she replied, "I do not read all the stuff because you do not have to. I study during study hours." There was no hint of stress in her at all. Her manner remained largely relaxed throughout the interviews during the school year.

Mary described her typical Monday and Tuesday schedule:

> I usually go to bed at 12:30 or 1:00 on Sunday nights. I get up at 6:30, shower, and go to eat by 7:30. I leave for American Lit at 8:00, computer at 9:00 and a break at 10:00. So, I eat lunch at 10:30. Then, physics at 11:00, precalculus, and I walk to another building for my 1:00 class and return to the building for Civilization. I finish at 3:00, which is cool, come back, lay around, chill out, check my e-mail, maybe do a little homework if motivated, check in at 4:00 with RC upstairs again. Often, I go downstairs to the lounge. I eat between 5:00 and 6:00 and am back for study session, in which I either sleep or study. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I leave the building at 8:00 because there is not much homework the next day. We walk around, go to the Village [a local strip of stores, fast food restaurants and bars]. I am back by 10:00 in the lounge until having to go upstairs at 10:30. Immediately, I head for my friend's room until 12:30. I don't like being in my room. We talk and study. I may continue to study back in my room. On Tuesday, I have a physics lab from 10:00–12:00, so I wake up at 8:30 and skip breakfast. On Thursday, I have a research class. After the lab, I eat lunch and do whatever. By night, I am doing homework, often in the computer lab, because Wednesday is a heavy day.

Even though Mary expected the school to be more demanding, she did not expect the amount of work and was struck by the difference between home and GI. She reported, "I didn't do [homework] at home. I read stuff at home. And it's just a kind of cheating. [Here] . . . I started out where I read everything, you know, every single page. But then it got to be too much work." In our first conversation, she indicated that one could not do all the work and she had adopted a study pattern to fit her circumstances: "In class, you notice each teacher's patterns and what they talk about, which parts they find important, and you can find that in the book instead of reading over everything. And so I've learned to find that kind of stuff." She continued, "Some people study all the time. . . . If I have to choose between giving up my entire social life and getting good grades, getting straight As or getting Bs and maybe a C and an A and having a social life, then I'll have a social life."

Homework is done primarily in social situations during the day in the lounge or in her room. Later, she slept through study sessions and did what she needed to do at night. When the situation started to get heavy, Mary knew how to talk with teachers in order to ask for an extension:

> Usually you go in like I've done it when I'm sick or if you just have other papers or you have tests. Like there was one time we had, it wasn't a small paper, it was a four-page paper. I went in and I was like, "look, I have tests in two classes that I have Cs in. I need to study for those tests, I don't have time to write a paper." She was like, "Okay, that's fine. You can turn it in to me in a few days."

Mary defined homework overload like others, but did not experience overload very often. When it occurred, she faulted herself:

> I have been [overloaded] just because I've been lazy, but, other than that, [laughs] technically, no, I have not been overloaded. . . . Yeah, if I had actually sat down and said, "Okay, I'm not going to go talk to Gina for an hour or two and not going to go play Nintendo, not going to go out and get coffee," then, yeah, I would have no problem getting it done.

In another conversation, she said "Um . . . I think there's a lot more stress here. You have to be prepared to handle a lot more stress." Yet, she did not seem especially stressed. She seemed to handle the adjustment easily. In March, she told me, "I waste a lot of time doing nothing." She liked to learn, "but it is just doing the actual work." Mary did not care about the specifics that earn the good grade, "Who cares? I know the main stuff."

Wanda

Our first meeting was in September at dinner when I went to eat with some of my floor mates who were her pals. Wanda

was a junior from a small city. She was tall and parted her hair in the middle. I saw her as a sensitive, funny person with a worried look. Wanda came to GI expecting an "almost magical world." She discovered that "everything is different . . . The diversity is just amazing! But, basically, everyone obviously is pretty smart and . . . really tolerant!" She liked her teachers because "They don't talk down to you." The academic demands were different, too: "The difficulty of the classes is all around. It's just a shock to actually have to study, to do homework." In a later interview, she said,

> At first, I was kind of running around like a chicken with its head off, going "Omigod, homework! I have to stay up and do it! I can't just get by!" Well, at my old school, I never had to work. And . . . you know, there was no point even going to school 'cause I could have done all the work on my own at home, just like, dropped it off whenever I woke up around noon. Like, now, I'm learning something from my classes. It's more like I can have like deeper conversations with [friends] and life isn't . . . so shallow.

Unusual for my notes and transcripts, I found no clear statement by Wanda identifying herself with humanities, science, or math, although she liked humanities and discussion-oriented courses.

Wanda's typical Monday and Tuesday schedule were busy:

> My Monday begins at 2:00 a.m. by going to bed after studying on Sunday. Five and a half hours later, my alarm rings at 7:30. I dress quickly, brush my teeth, go to breakfast, and hurry to my 8:00 American Lit class munching on a donut. Classes follow quickly in German, precalculus, and physics. I race to a building across campus for astronomy and return to the dinning hall for lunch at 1:00. After eating, I check my e-mail and arrive by 2:00 in Civilization. At 3:00, I go back to my room, listen to music for an hour before going downstairs at 4:00 to play foosball. At 5:00, I either go to the dining hall or return to my room to make Ramen noodles in the microwave. When done, I routinely return to the lounge to waste time until 6:30. During study session I listen to music, sleep infrequently, and maybe study [if pushed by a major reading assignment.] At 8:00, I leave the building to walk with friends just to get away from GI. My workload influences whether I return in 1 or 2 hours. Often, I go directly to my room to start studying until 12:00 on Monday. Tuesday, I am up at 9:00 for breakfast and at 11:00 for my research class. After lunch between 12:00 and 2:00, I start physics homework, followed by a lab from 2:00 to 4:00. Sometimes, I eat in the dining hall and then at 6:00 go to my astronomy class until 7:30. I miss most of the study session. But, I must return to my room until the end of study session before leaving the building at 8:00. The second semester, Thursday was a no classes day. I eat dinner at 4:30.

In her free time, Wanda socialized mainly with boys. Studying came second for her. "When I'm in class, I'm sort of in a different mindset that when I'm back at the dorm." Wanda was more adventurous than most students were in that she tested the limits of the dorm rules. Her group left the dorm whenever possible to walk around the campus. Hanging out in the lounge was "routine," although the amount diminished the second semester. She talked on the telephone after curfew to other GI students for up to 2 hours a night.

Wanda shared a belief about homework with many others:

> I find that, you know, you're not going to be able to get everything done. And, if you spend all your time doing homework, you're just going to go crazy, get stressed out. . . . [I decide] what needs to be done. I prioritize. Well, in certain classes there's always going to be homework, like precalculus. But, if I don't do one homework assignment, then it's not going to be that big of a deal. But, a class like physics, there's only about five homework assignments in like every term, so if I miss one, that's 20 points out of 100, so that's a pretty big deal.

She said in another interview, "A lot of people . . . spend a lot of time during the day doing their homework. But, like me, personally, I do homework at night. . . . I study sort of like maybe 2 or 3 hours on average a day. But, then there're some days when I maybe do 6, 7, or 8." The frequency with which she used open times to study seemed less than other students. I saw her often in the lounge playing foosball or pool. My sense was that she did not study efficiently. In the second semester, Wanda claimed that being caught up with work happened only once; while in the first semester, she was usually a week or more behind. Wanda began studying in less time when she learned how to "procrastinate . . . and prioritize," which meant being sensitive to demands of the teacher and the style of the class. She particularly liked a history class because homework could be put off until the test. Wanda asked for an extension by claiming overwork or being sick. She differentiated among teachers who she knew could be asked and those who imposed penalties. Unlike other prime informants, she described completing an assignment for one class during another class. Replying to a question about whether her strate-

gies relieved the pressure, she stated, "And part of the pressure is that you know you're just BS-ing all this crap. And you should probably be learning something and actually doing all the readings and taking notes on the readings, but . . . it's not very logical." So, attempts at relief created more stress. Adding to her stress, Wanda experienced intermittent doubt that she should be at GI. She said,

> Sometimes it's like I just don't fit in . . . academically. Because I feel, the homework and stuff, I just haven't really adjusted to it. My grades really are not acceptable to my mother. I don't know. It's so much different here that I think it's impossible for someone to just be completely for it. I don't know, it's like life is completely different.
>
> (Larry: Well, from your face, you look like you're a little conflicted about this.)
>
> Yeah. I really want to stay here. I don't know if it's more because I don't want to go back, or if it's because I want to stay here.
>
> (Larry: I know you talked about leaving once before. What gets it going, that feeling?)
>
> I don't know. It's a lot of work here, but I can't say it's just the work. It's like . . . there's no release from the GI life. No matter what you do, you're always thinking can I get . . . credit? Or maybe I should be doing homework instead of this, or, since I have some free time, maybe I should call my parents.

Tracie

I recall seeing Tracie during orientation. Her animated expression caught my attention among a group of junior girls who were talking and seemingly trying to maintain some distance from their families. She was wearing denim shorts, and a T-shirt, and she had long brown hair. Tracie regarded herself as "a people person." "I am more humanities," she asserted. Arriving at GI was very exciting. The stimulation and challenge was what she "was looking for" in an environment that let her be her true self. This feeling of stimulation lasted into the second semester.

Tracie described her typical Monday and Tuesday schedule like this:

> I get up at 7:15 to go to breakfast. Statistics class starts at 8:00; literature at 9:00; civilization at 10:00, and Chinese at 11:00. Lunch break is from 12:00 to 1:00. I generally eat, but sometimes, if I have a paper to type or something, I'd skip lunch and go and take care of it. British Lit is at 1:00. And, I have a 2:00 to 3:00 break, which is really nice because it allows me time to read what I'd just been assigned in Brit Lit or to go ahead. I study some in my room or in the lounge, which is quiet at that time. Then, Anatomy at is at 3:00. Back to dorm at 4:00, when I talk for a few minutes, go check in, maybe read or clean up the room, and go with my roommate to dinner at 4:30. At 5:30, I am hanging out in the dorm or back in my room, studying a little bit or working on a project. When study session begins at 6:30, I usually either study through, or talk to my roommate, or sometimes we watch movies. And at 8:00, if I'm feeling adventurous, I'll venture out of the building with my roommate and we'll go for a walk or go to Revco. Usually we are back in the building by about 9:00. I either hang out in the lounge, talk to people, or head back to my floor and hang out in my RC's apartment talking or making creative things for our floor. Otherwise I go back to my room and study. At about 10:30, I shower and am in bed by 12:30, reading until 1:00. On Tuesday I only have one class, so I do homework or I work at a fast food restaurant on campus. For the rest of the day, I hang out and do homework.

Tracie had a relationship with a boy near the end of the first semester. They were close, but "no big deal." She was active in lots of different GI clubs. Her RC recommended that she become a RA in the spring, which was a sign that she was recognized by adults as exhibiting the kinds of behavior that GI wants to encourage. Interestingly, the school's view of her was more positive than her view of the school. She "loved being here," yet had serious reservations about how the school was organized. Tracie regarded most of the stress at GI as being caused by a system that encourages irresponsible behavior. She disliked many of the rules and saw them as unnecessary. Her view of the mandated study session was that it encourages kids to let external rules control them. This is what she meant by encouraging irresponsible behavior: "We should be allowed to do it the way we want, and, if we cannot handle it, the consequences should be real." If a student cannot handle it, he or she should leave.

Tracie was someone who kept her priorities in mind. "I look at what I have to do and I do it." The pattern for doing homework that she followed was similar to the general pattern for the school. She did not hand in work late. If she could not get it done, she approached teachers for an extension, explaining that "I have a lot of heavy work to do right now and I will get it to you by whenever." The teachers accepted her expla-

nation and gave her leeway. Tracie said, "There are wonderful supports in place, if students ask." Grousing over homework is simply "scapegoating the teachers."

Tracie did homework and she studied. The terms were different for her. In the middle of the second semester, she speculated, "Sometimes, the homework gets in the way of learning." She meant that she wanted to pursue some personal interests and the homework got in the way. Tracie liked social activity and conversation with friends (male and female), so she made time for that. Tracie was rarely found in the lounge. When not in class, she was on her floor in her room or visiting a friend or RC or doing homework. Tracie was one of the juniors who asked to be excused from study session, like seniors can do, because she has demonstrated that she did not need it.

Being at GI was "intense," she said, but not especially stressful. Tracie organized her day so as to have large blocks of time to do reading. However, she did not obsess over the reading. Tracie did feel overloaded from time to time, but typically got it done. When she was tired, she went to sleep. I regarded her as serious and fun-loving.

Summary and Synthesis of the Four Girls

The story of each girl illustrates a common pattern of adjustment to the rigorous academic demands within the general description of homework and studying. The four cases capture the experience of most students at the Greenhouse Institute, but not everyone. I will return to that point in the next section.

Cindy's pattern was "doing the right thing" in terms of her often-expressed allegiance to her family's values. She drove herself to do all the work and would push herself until she was exhausted, even though she did not believe she could do all the homework the way she wanted. This occurred in a cyclical pattern. Among the three, only she studied consistently during study session. Cindy was organized about her activities, as seen in both her study pattern and her social life. Having a boyfriend gave her a consistent social relationship that the others did not have. Cindy had good study and time-management skills, but her values prevented her from setting priorities that would enable her to experience less pressure. She generally maintained a very positive attitude toward the school despite the pressure, was motivated to learn as much as she could, and was reconciled that, because of time and the amount of work required, she could not study the way would have preferred. I think Cindy could moderate her pattern of behavior to reduce her tension. My guess was that she would modify her approach as a senior and become more like Tracie.

Mary's pattern of "socializing over academics" showed her values as her basic operating principle for studying. She was not going to postpone social activity for academic demands, unless she had no choice. Mary was a realist in that she did what needed to get done. Her relaxed, confident style kept her from being overwhelmed by the demands. She recognized that feeling overloaded was a result of her not keeping up with the work. Mary did not think all the work could be done, and she did not try to do it. Her lack of concern for grades and accomplishment moderated her tension. Mary would do the work, yet she did not seem to push herself to new heights. She claimed she loved to learn, but was satisfied with getting the main idea and not being obsessed with the details and, thus for her, grades. Most of her studying was done in a social situation with girl friends. I think Mary will handle it the way she does no matter what.

Wanda experienced the academic demands as persistent pressure. She was active in "defending on the edge" of imminent disaster. She was caught like Cindy in a pattern that offered sporadic relief; yet, she was concerned about her social relationships like Mary. In the beginning, Wanda was worried about getting the work done. Once she learned to deal with the situation, she still could not relax because she had persistent doubts of being able to fit in academically. Wanda seemed uncomfortable and unable to reconcile herself to GI. She separated the school from the dorm part of the Institute. Of the three, Wanda seemed to have the weakest study skills and a less realistic view of the school. Luck also may have been unkind to her and increased the academic and social pressure she felt because she had a class schedule that placed her in class at times when others studied and she had teachers with teaching styles that reinforced Wanda's poor study decisions. In other words, her adjustment was made more difficult by chance factors. I saw Wanda as constantly being in turmoil and on the defensive as she struggled with the academic demands and with her personal conflict about staying, although I felt her adventurous spirit might keep her going. At the end of the school year, I expected she would not be back. When I returned the next fall for a member check, she greeted me warmly.

Tracie's approach to doing homework followed the larger pattern of *taking-it-in-stride*. She experienced the intensity of GI in an apparently less stressful way than many of her classmates. Recognizing that homework was something that needed to be done, Tracie organized her time to do it. There was enough time to get most of the work done. At times, she worried and had feelings of being overloaded; yet, those thoughts led toward resolution. Needing more time, she requested it and used the resources of GI to her advantage. Tracie did not let the homework requirement push her beyond her limits or her sense of self. When she was tired, she went to sleep. Tracie was committed to learning and made time to read what interested her outside of homework assignments. In her view, inappropriate school rules encouraged irresponsible behavior in her peers and

led them to use teachers as scapegoats. Tracie loved GI, seemed to extract what it had to offer, and was ready to move on to another experience. Tracy seemed to be in the right place.

Concluding Thoughts on the Meaning of Homework at GI for the Participants

The story of how students dealt with the shock of encountering homework demands in an academically rigorous environment and their adjustment is based on the ethnographic data I gathered over 1 year. The general way students handle homework and studying was presented, as were four cases of studying in action. Three were based on juniors who were prime informants. The fourth person, Tracie, was not a single person. She was an amalgam of conversations with juniors and seniors about being juniors. Their patterns were evident from our interviews and conversations. The cases illustrate characteristic patterns of adjusting to GI and the choices students make as they became GIs. Over time, as we lived together, I could see their "shock" and how they attempted to deal with life in the Greenhouse Institute. The cases capture much of the experience for students at GI, including the males. Seeing similar patterns of adjustment to homework and studying in both genders increases my sense of confidence in the existence of such patterns. The cases are intended to depict four variations within the school, not variations in any pattern, and to give life to the patterns.

Comparing the four cases, Tracie's story is the most common. She takes GI in stride by experiencing the intensity, having occasional misgivings, and looking toward the future. In my list of 89 persons with whom I spoke periodically at GI, the majority falls into this group. There is variation within the group, so it would be inappropriate to assume that Tracie's way of taking it in stride fits how others take it in stride. However, the tone of her life is reminiscent of many others. Taking it in stride fits more seniors than juniors. Juniors withdrawing before the senior year may explain some of this finding.

I have speculated about the preponderance of the Tracie-like group. A strong possibility is that any explanation of the adjustments should be tempered by the observation that Tracie might have arrived with the propensity to behave in the manner she did. Among the three other cases, I can find signs of their particular pattern of adjustment in my early field notes. However, the signs are not so strong as to convince me that context is not the prime influence on adjustment.

I began the study looking for students who would be illustrative of personal characteristics such as gender, academic self-identity, ethnicity, geographic region, and so forth. For 3 months, I struggled to get the perfect combination and was frustrated by the reality of my limited resources and the variety of students. Eventually, I reminded myself with some help from friends that a purposeful sample should reveal the most data possible about a situation and that taking into account an entire set of characteristics might not necessarily yield the most useful data. In the end, I selected informants who literally appeared before me, possessed some personal or demographic characteristics I felt important, and with whom I thought I could have a meaningful conversation, and I was rewarded with a wide range of informants that do resemble the composition of the school population. However, by choosing junior female voices to describe the story of shock and adjustment, the personal and demographic characteristics of my prime informants may seem more restricted than they were.

What does this study mean for parents, students, and theoreticians? On the most obvious level, significant homework demands will be placed on students for the first time in their academic experience in a school like GI. All students have to adjust to that reality. The pressure created by highly motivated, high-ability students with histories of easily achieved school success meeting demanding teachers and curricula mean parents and students should be prepared for a life focused more than is typical in high school on learning large amounts of complex information. Potential applicants should recognize this an that the actual amount of time spent studying is related to one's schedule, personal characteristics, and time of the semester. Graduates of GI who have gone to prestigious colleges and universities have reported that GI is more demanding than the colleges. I wonder if this is the case or if the GI experience prepares them for a challenging university environment in ways they do not appreciate. That is, students learn how to deal with multiple demands in a busy, high-energy environment surrounded with bright peers. While I have no data directly on this question, my guess is that GI prepares those who graduate for the university experience.

Must there be a "shock" associated with homework and studying? According to this group of students, the probability is high as long as high schools place few academic demands on students and GI places high academic demands. But, that is not the full story of the context that operates in GI. Some of the shock is fueled by the nature of the students brought together with students like themselves. All the students view themselves as serious about learning and place expectations on themselves that might exaggerate the situation. In two community meetings of adults and students where the hot topic for discussion was homework and feelings of pressure, different students, male and female, volunteered that "most of us do it to ourselves" and that the school's organization and curriculum are only part of the story.

I have presented the shock as being primarily associated with studying, and I suspect I have placed too much emphasis on academics. Part of the experience of shock is leaving home

as a high school junior to enter an environment that is neither like your school nor like your home. Living in a dorm brings on its own adjustment, and I am sure the two cannot be separated cleanly, although I have acted as if that is so in this paper. Mary said at one point, "We're supposed to be here for the academics mostly, I think. The residential completely influences how you do academically. At least it does for me. I guess [for] some people it might be the opposite." In a paper used in orientation for Residential Counselors, the intertwining of academic and residential is also evident: "The Greenhouse Institute is a holistic school where student choices have an effect on the entire academic experience and behavior in the residential aspect affects the academic aspect and vice versa."

I opened this paper with the notion that a theory of talent development should contain the proposition that willingness to commit to a talent is a significant part of talent development. I speculated that doing homework might be one sign of a growing commitment to academic talent. On first thought, this seemed reasonable. Now, after a year in the field, I might have been premature in my assertion. I am unsure whether homework is a sign of talent development. I know that, in other talent domains, practice over a long period of time is important. Does homework qualify as an example of practice? What exactly is being practiced and how is that linked to academic talent? After watching GI students, I am less sure of a relationship. Electing to take more coursework might be a better sign of commitment than homework. At GI, students who defined themselves as humanities or science persons tended to elect more courses in that area.

Is the shock part of the process of making a commitment? Surviving shock is part of developing a sense of one's agency in an area. In that way, shock may be instrumental in making a commitment, if the feeling is attached to the talent area.

Is adjusting to GI, a place where academic talent is encouraged, an indicator of committing to a talent? It certainly is an indicator of being responsive to a demanding environment. Choosing to stay at GI may be a sign of commitment. In this setting, staying is a clearer sign of motivation than doing homework because homework can be done in so many ways, but staying requires one to keep within the institutional boundaries. Students who are choosing to remain in GI's demanding academic environment, rather than return to their home school, are making a statement about themselves. Of course, some may be doing it for social reasons or to avoid being at their home school or family. At the Greenhouse Institute, students learn how to live in one fast-paced, high-energy environment among others who are like them in being serious about learning. The ability to live in such a setting may be a precursor to the development of talent when it occurs in other similar kinds of settings. Learning to live at GI prepares one for educational settings that have more advanced students of that talent domain.

Are the most successful students at GI the ones who are the most committed to the development of academic talent? I do not know. They may be committed to reaching some goal that may or may not be related to a talent. For example, "I want to be a doctor" could be an indicator of commitment to a talent or more simply a sign that a child might make a commitment. Becoming a journeyman doctor is not the same as being committed to a talent.

Is commitment to academic talent shown by doing homework? It may be part of it, but certainly not the whole story. Would doing homework better or more completely be a better sign? I have insufficient information on this point. I know students develop strategies; maybe they should be called survival strategies regarding homework. For example, not doing some homework or skipping reading to do another more pressing assignment may not mean growing commitment at all. Handing in quality work might be a better sign than simply doing homework. However, I did not collect enough data to answer that question.

At the conclusion of this study I am unsure whether I learned much about commitment or I even know what I meant by the term. Such is research. I started with a clearer notion of where I was going than where I arrived. I invite others to go into settings that are known to encourage the development of talent and find out what is happening there.

After hearing or reading of the Greenhouse Institute, I have been asked whether GI is a happy place. It is an intense place. Students are forced by the circumstances they have chosen to come to terms with what they want and their abilities. For some, that may be positive; for others, it may be negative. Some students told me that the situation reignited their thirst for learning. For others, they learned they could handle heavy demands, live away from home, and prepare themselves for the future. I am still thinking about how students make sense of this. A future paper will be on the emotional demands of homework and how the culture (faculty, administration, and students) is responsive to individuals.

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End Notes

1. All names within this article are pseudonyms.

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