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Credentials: Mainstreaming the Highly Gifted Homeschooled Student for Accelerated, Accredited, Simultaneous High School and College Diplomas

By Peggy Madsen

This is a personal account of one family's experience with early college attendance by two of our gifted children. The first child went to public school, and the second one was homeschooled until age 13. Both children began attending college at age 13. We were not interested in circumventing the system as much as we wanted to get real credit for our children's ability levels. We found out about college mainstreaming by accident at first, having been given our eldest daughter's complete public high school course book while she was still in eighth grade. That planning book noted that high school students were allowed to complete some of their high school credit requirements by taking college courses, and she went on to do that, taking several courses through independent study and others by actual attendance at our local community college. The intriguing thing about our daughter's experience was that those college courses, which enabled her to graduate our local public high school by age 16, were accepted as transfer credit toward her undergraduate college degree. Early graduation was not favored by my daughter's public school, but she persevered, and with the principal's permission, she graduated from high school one year early, and went on to get her undergraduate degree by age 20. Her good grades and acceleration made her stand out on subsequent applications; she was awarded a full scholarship to a prestigious Colorado law school.

For the second child, who was 100% homeschooled, mainstreaming was a bit more difficult. Like you, we had heard of precocious students attending college, but had assumed that this was only for a small percentage of very highly gifted children. When our son tested as reading better than 60% of all college seniors, at age 11, we began to look for ways to get him "credentials", or proof of his abilities, other than infrequent tests. He went the route of many gifted students at first, taking the SAT and ACT tests at an early age, and being selected by the Rocky Mountain Talent Search for a special gifted students' summer session at the University of Denver. There are programs similar to this one across the country at Johns Hopkins, Duke and other colleges. One thing to note here is that the summer courses we have found in such programs do not necessarily transfer as real college credit to either four-year or community colleges, and high schools may or may not accept the courses for high school credit. Let the buyer beware!

We began to try to get my son into the same community college that his sister had attended while in public high school. However, as a homeschooled student, he had no school record, an important consideration, as far as the advisor was concerned, in being accepted. The college also now had a minimum age of 16 for high school students. The college advisor refused to look at his SAT, ACT, IQ or reading test scores, or any transcripts of the college gifted programs he had attended. The way he finally managed to be considered was by getting a high score on the college's entrance exam, an open test he was able to take simply by showing up and looking tall. He was admitted to college at age 13, and needs the Dean's signature for every course he takes, but these are real college courses, not just part of a so-called college gifted enrichment program.

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My son has been attending this college for four semesters now. Since he started at an early age, he has taken only a few courses at a time, happily resulting in a 4.0 average. If he continues to take only three or four courses at a time through fall, spring and summer semesters, he should have his Associate in Arts degree by age 17. Here in Colorado, this degree is directly transferable as "CORE Curriculum" to many four-year colleges; it will count as his first two years of college there. We have found out even better news: that the college courses he is currently taking will be accepted, subject to course matching and approval, on a two-for-one basis at an *accredited* correspondence high school. This means that for every semester-long college course he attends, he should receive *one year* of a single high school course. After taking five extra (half year long) high school correspondence courses, which is the minimum number of courses he is required to take directly from that correspondence high school, he will also have an accredited high school diploma by the time he is 17.

In speaking to other parents and teachers, we have found that the strategy we have chosen is not popular with everyone; parents also tend not to be informed of these options by their child's public or private school. Guidance counselors will not always tell you all your gifted child's choices; the accepted belief held by many is that *all* children need all their years of high school, regardless of academic ability. You will probably find you need to be your gifted child's advocate above and beyond the beliefs and limits of the high school counselor. If you are like me, you recall, with no fondness, waiting out a very dull public school senior year, already having been accepted into college. Homeschooled and public school students alike can abbreviate such waiting, and more, but the best rule of thumb here is to get informed, find your options, and choose the plan with which you and your children are most comfortable. Some colleges require SAT or ACT scores or their own admission tests; others will accept parent-generated transcripts for homeschool students. There are even some four-year colleges with *no minimum age* and no high school diploma requirement for correspondence or online courses. Read the admissions requirements, but read between the lines, too; contact the colleges directly and keep trying. Sometimes special permission is required, as it was in our son's case.

Your gifted student will do a great deal of coursework of one kind or another through his academic career, whether homeschooled or not. Why not make it count? The advantages of early college are many, for those who choose this path.

Peggy Madsen is Gifted Children's Coordinator and webmaster for High Mountain Mensa in Colorado. She is also the Team Leader for AMC's Internet Services Content Advisory Subcommittee. A PRP winner in 1998, she and her husband have three children, two of whom are homeschooled. Peggy and the two youngest children were recently featured on a nationally syndicated news story on the benefits of early learning. Chris Madsen, the middle child, is also a member of Mensa.

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