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The Center for Gifted Studies

BY ERIK MEADORS

Dr. Julia Roberts, Director of The Center for Gifted Studies at Western Kentucky University, has devoted her academic career to developing opportunities. The Center's mission statement echoes this commitment — to encourage excellence by providing educational opportunities and resources to three populations: gifted and talented students, educators working with gifted students, and parents of gifted students.



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The gifted are an exceptional portion of our population whose needs vary — sometimes greatly — from what is traditionally taught in schools. In order for them to have continuous progress, special services must be provided. Sometimes that means a leadership forum or a special voice coach; other times it could mean that a second grader spends part of her day in a fourth grade classroom or that summer enrichment is provided. Since gifted and talented students may be identified in five areas (general academic ability, specific subject aptitude, leadership, creativity, and visual or performing arts), their educators must be able to meet those individual needs. This requires special training. And since these children typically have more intense social-emotional needs, parents as well as educators must have resources available to address these needs. This is

the point where The Center comes in. Roberts explains that the vision of The Center for Gifted Studies is to become an internationally preeminent center. This includes expanding services in five areas: 1) offering educational programs for gifted youth and children; 2) providing professional development opportunities for educators; 3) enhancing communication and advocacy for gifted children; 4) conducting research and developing curriculum to remove the learning ceiling; and 5) building a testing and counseling component for gifted children and their families. Through her strong commitment to research and provisions for gifted students, she has made The Center a growing, challenging program ranked among the top 15 Centers in the United States. "We hope to become one of the top five Centers in the nation," Roberts said.

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And she is certainly the one to lead the way. Roberts has been the director of The Center for Gifted Studies since it originated nineteen years ago. Her strong educational background and national leadership roles have contributed to The Center being what it is. She serves on the Board of the National Association for Gifted Children and currently chairs the Legislative Task Force. She is also an active board member for the Kentucky Association for Gifted Education as well



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Dr. Julia Roberts

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as The Association for the Gifted and Co-Chair of the Kentucky Advisory Council for Gifted Education. In 1998 the National Association for Gifted Children honored her as Educator of the Year. That same year Western Kentucky University named her Distinguished Professor, a prestigious honor awarded to only two a year.

In accordance with its vision, much of the research done by The Center is used to benefit the quality of learning for gifted students by getting rid of the learning ceiling. Research is primarily funded through grants focusing on specific partnerships with schools designed to achieve certain goals. For example, federal grants totaling more than one million dollars have focused on primary and middle school achievement with the most recent being the Eisenhower Middle School Mathematics and Science Project. The goal of the Eisenhower Project is to improve the teaching of science and math to Kentucky middle school students by teaching educators to differentiate the curriculum so that all students' needs, regardless of ability, are being met.

The student programs offered by The Center provide enrichment opportunities for gifted and talented young people — another part of their vision. Since 1983, The Summer Camp for Academically Talented Middle School Students (SCATS) has provided a diverse curriculum and a wide range of enrichment courses for almost 200 residential and non-residential middle school students annually. For two weeks, students take four classes a day that stimulate and challenge — anything from chess to clowning to computers. Most SCATS teachers are fulfilling the practicum component for earning a specialist in gifted education endorsement (an opportunity for educators provided by The Center in conjunction with Western).

The Duke Talent Identification Program is another summer program offered in conjunction with The Center. The Summer Program for Verbally and Mathematically Precocious Youth (VAMPY) is a three-week residential program for students entering grades eight through eleven who scored exceptionally well as seventh graders on college entrance exams (SAT/ACT). VAMPY campers take only one class that focuses on one subject. Offerings this year include such classes as The Holocaust and Nazi Germany, Psychology, and C++. The camp provides a balance of educational, cultural, and recreational experiences.

Elementary school students also have opportunity for enrichment through a program called Super Saturdays. Five Saturday afternoons in the months of January and February, high ability children take a course that interests and challenges them. These give students the opportunity to interact with other bright young people while broadening their knowledge and abilities. Classes, ranging from Bridge Building and Super Science to Choir and The Medieval World, emphasize hands-on learning.

The Center for Gifted Studies annually offers travel/study opportunities for both students of high ability and interested adults. Since 1986, The Center has taken groups to Russia, China, Great Britain, Italy, France, Belgium, Hong Kong, and The Netherlands where they learn about the history and culture of the places visited. Next year, The Center will host The British Experience and Spring Break in Paris. These programs are designed to broaden experiences by offering a global perspective.

The Center for Gifted Studies not only provides opportunities for students, but also for the teachers who instruct them. Two major programs are offered in cooperation with The College Board Southern Region, one being The Advanced Placement Summer Institute. Since 1983, The Center has offered this institute which annually trains over 300 beginning and experienced high school AP teachers from the United States and abroad. The Center prepares teachers for the in-



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tense learning environment that will be needed for the academically gifted students in their schools. The second program is The Vertical Team Institute. Offered in both Mathematics and English, The Vertical Team Institutes are designed to ease the transition between middle school and high school curricula by vertically articulating the curriculum to help more students reach world-class standards. The College Board piloted The Vertical Team Institutes at Western Kentucky University.

Another opportunity for educators is the Leadership Institute, which is designed to aid teachers, administrators, and counselors in developing leadership skills among youth. This program helps to insure that gifted young students have ample resources and polished skills to work well in leadership roles. Educator opportunities abound.

Almost two decades after The Center's creation, Roberts is well on her way to achieving the vision and actualizing the mission. The Center has made a difference in hundreds, maybe even thousands, of lives. Roberts continues to receive notes from alumni of the various programs sponsored by The Center. In one e-mail, a woman who participated

in a program 15 years ago thanked Roberts for her "lifetime of work with programs for gifted children, their teachers and their parents. Fifteen years later, I can say your program helped shape my life in a positive way, and I will never forget it." Indeed, old friends drop occasional notes, send unsolicited e-mails, and stop by just to keep in touch. After all, the needs of these people have been met — at least partially — through The Center. "The success stories are numerous, and I feel honored that The Center has played a small part, I hope, in those successes," Roberts said.

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