

Ten Commandments for Academic Talent Development

François Gagné, Ph. D.

Honorary Professor of Psychology
Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Canada

[NOTE. The present handout is composed of excerpts from the following forthcoming publication: Gagné, F. (in press). Ten commandments for academic talent development. Gifted Child Quarterly.]

The idea for the present text grew out of an earlier project, namely to formulate a coherent set of basic statements, or rationale, concerning the nature of human abilities, gifts, and talents (Gagné, 1999). As I was working on that project, I began imagining a logical follow-up to that first set, expanded to cover the subjects of identification and special enrichment provisions. As I began working on that second list of principles, the idea of stating them as commandments sprang up to my mind, no doubt influenced by the multiplicity of such lists in popularized articles. I fixed my own target at ten; creating more than the original Author might appear presumptuous! The task proved more difficult than originally expected.

God's original Ten Commandments did not break any new ground. These were guidelines that had probably been around for centuries: you shall honor God and your parents, you shall not kill nor steal, and so forth. The same goes with those I will propose here; each of them has been mentioned over the years by at least a few scholars in the field, sometimes by many of them. The ten commandments described below can be subdivided into two sets. The first four target identification procedures, the "who" of talent development; they ensue directly from the conceptual framework of my Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT; see Gagné, 2003, 2004). The next five pertain to intervention modalities, the "how" of talent development. Their relationship with the DMGT is much less direct. The last one stands alone as a reminder for realistic expectations.

I - Thou Shalt Distinguish ... Horizontally!

The first commandment enjoins educators (a) to acknowledge the large diversity of gifts and talents, as they manifest themselves in domains and sub-domains of giftedness, as well as numerous fields and sub-fields of talent; (b) to apply these qualitative distinctions appropriately by a precise labeling of a person's gift(s) or talent(s); and (c) to acknowledge the target population served under the umbrella label of "gifted education," namely IGAT (Intellectually gifted and academically talented) students.

II - Thou Shalt Discriminate ... Vertically!

The second commandment demands a constant awareness of differences in intensity, from mild levels—top 10%—to extreme ones (1:100,000). If they kept in mind that vertical perspective, educators in general, and G/T program coordinators in particular, would be in a better position to (a) label gifted and talented individuals more appropriately, (b) associate different talent development needs with different levels, (c) recognize that virtually all IGAT students identified and served belong to the mild and moderate levels, and (d) refrain from improper hyperbole in their descriptions of mild-level IGAT students.

III - Thou Shalt Identify ... Multicomponently!

The third commandment invites G/T program coordinators to expand their list of identification criteria beyond intellectual giftedness and academic talent, and look especially for the presence of three intrapersonal catalysts: motivation, willpower, and self-management. As a mnemonic device, the multi-components discussed here could be thought of as the five P's of Identification: Potential, (past) Performance, Passion, Perseverance, and ... P-autonomy!

IV - Thou Shalt Select ... Armsopenly!

In continuity with the first and second commandments, the fourth commandment enjoins school administrators and G/T program coordinators to (a) expand their selection ratio by revising the unduly restrictive 5% rule, and (b) broaden their definition of relevant target populations by subdividing the IGAT population according to their strengths in specific disciplines, as well as identifying promising youth in arts, athletics, business, or technology. This open arms outlook would contribute to increase substantially the proportion of identified gifted and talented individuals, and bring an armful of new recruits to talent development programs.

V – Thou Shalt Intervene ... Earliestly!

The fifth commandment is based on the early manifestation of precocious cognitive giftedness. It demands that school administrators recognize it, and respond appropriately to the need for early enrichment it expresses. Responding “earliestly” means as early as kindergarten. Thus, the fifth commandment pleads for a generalization of early entrance to school provisions as the cornerstone of a comprehensive program of K-12 services for IGAT students. So, when should we start our interventions? If still alive, Sherlock Holmes would answer: “Pre-elementary, my dear Watson!”

VI – Thou Shalt Condense ... Foremostly!

The sixth commandment marks the entrance into the What and How of IGAT services. Their key purpose is enrichment. Four enrichment modalities are identified: Density, Difficulty, Depth, and Diversity. The need for enrichment opportunities originates from the recognition of very large individual differences in learning ability (ease and speed) between the slowest and fastest learners. This commandment argues for the priority of curriculum condensing (or compacting) over the three others, because the faster pace (a) directly responds to IGAT students’ core characteristic, their ease and speed in learning, (b) contributes to relieve the major source of boredom for IGAT students, and (c) liberates hours of learning time which become available to offer other forms of enrichment.

VII – Thou Shalt Accelerate ... Asneededly!

The seventh commandment defends the use of academic acceleration for IGAT students, an enrichment in density that breaks down the artificial walls of grade levels. It invites educators to inform themselves about the highly positive academic and socio-affective impacts of all forms of accelerative enrichment, especially by consulting the recently published National Report on Acceleration (www.nationdeceived.org). This objective assessment of accelerative provisions should help them put aside negative preconceptions, and adopt a more open mind when they examine the various available provisions to better serve the educational needs of IGAT students.

VIII – Thou Shalt Enrich ... Relevantly

The eighth commandment targets the content of enrichment activities offered to IGAT students within the K-12 education system. The major concern expressed, that of relevance, originates from recurring observations by professionals in the field of sloppily planned and implemented activities by many regular classroom teachers. Relevance can be ensured in two different ways, either as the subjective relevance expressed through the personal choices of target IGAT students, or as the socio-cultural relevance observed in well-constructed pre-packaged curricula. These well-structured enrichment curricula often imply the full-time grouping of IGAT students, another very controversial question I will now turn to in the next commandment.

IX – Thou Shalt Group ... Fulltimely!

The ninth commandment addresses a subject as controversial as the theme of acceleration. Yet, the opposition to the full-time grouping of IGAT students remains hard to understand in view of both the positive research evidence and the accumulated evidence on the almost total lack of any enrichment activities specifically targeting talented students in regular classrooms. The teachers' priorities at all levels of the K-12 educational system target the learning difficulties of students at the other end of the achievement continuum. The low priority of IGAT students' needs is reflected in their non-appearance in the curriculum of most pre-service teacher training programs. In that context, responding adequately to the special educational needs of fast learners becomes literally a "mission impossible!" That inescapable conclusion leads directly to the generalization of full-time grouping as the only way to create appropriate conditions for an enriched curriculum. To summarize the main advantages of full-time grouping, first it answers a permanent problem with a full-time solution; second, it facilitates the enrichment of all subject matters in the regular curriculum; finally, it does not require adding a (costly) teacher to the school's personnel.

X – Thou Shalt Dream ... Eyeswideopenly!

The tenth commandment cautions talented youth, as well as their educators and parents against dreaming of fame and eminence with their eyes shut. On the long road to unparalleled excellence, young talented children will need to overcome many intrapersonal and environmental obstacles, as well as face the very restricted definition of eminence. Dreaming "eyeswideopenly" means not only to remain aware of these major hurdles, but also to open one's eyes to more modest, but still highly desirable achievement goals. It also suggests keeping one's eyes wide open to non-competitive ways of pursuing the actualization of personal gifts toward more self-oriented life goals.

Conclusion

What would happen in the daily life of a large school district if its administrators and teachers decided to implement the ten commandments summarized in Table 2? Here is a brief overview of some of the observed effects.

- Natural abilities (gifts, potential) would be clearly distinguished from systematically developed skills (talents, achievements). [C-I]
- A large diversity of gifts and talents would be clearly identified and labeled. [C-I]
- Thanks to a clearly set minimum threshold, the size of the gifted/talented population would be precisely known. [C-II]
- Thanks to the MB system of levels, a student's degree of marginality would be identified. [C-II]
- G/T coordinators would be able to pinpoint behavioral differences between individuals at mild levels, as opposed to high or exceptional levels of giftedness and talent. [C-II]
- The identification process would include not only the typical measures of intellectual giftedness (IQ as potential) and academic talent (grades), but also potentially relevant indices of motivation (passion), volition (perseverance), and personality (p-autonomy). [C-III]
- Efforts would be made to identify and serve students with non-IGAT gifts and talents. [C-IV]
- There would be a constant concern by all personnel to identify gifted and talented individuals in all types of school-based and after school activities. [C-IV]
- School districts would stop predetermining the prevalence of the gifted/talented population. [C-IV]
- As a result of the three preceding policies, the percentage of identified gifted/talented students would increase considerably. [C-IV]
- Instead of applying the usual age-based entrance rule, school districts would implement an Early Entrance provision based on appropriate school-readiness measures; it would allow as many as ten percent of the more precocious learners to enter kindergarten or first grade early. [C-V]
- As recognition of large individual differences in ease and speed of learning, enrichment in density (DS) would be institutionalized in every classroom. [C-VI]

- Thanks to the preceding practice, all teachers would fill the liberated time with other forms of enrichment (DF, DP, DV). [C-VI]
- Beyond Early Entrance, a diversity of accelerative enrichment provisions would cover all grade levels of the K-12 curriculum. The typical age/grade lockstep would consequently disappear as the universal pacing for every student. [C-VII]
- The school district would offer in at least one elementary and one middle school a special fast-paced track available to at least 30% of the school population. That fast track would reduce by at least one year the length of the progress through the grades covered. Within that fast track, further enrichment would be available to faster learners. [C-VII]
- Enrichment activities would be much more systematically planned at all grade levels, especially with regard to students' interests and passions. [C-VIII]
- To facilitate the delivery of appropriate enrichment by teachers, full-time IGAT grouping would begin as early as the number of students would allow it. [C-IX]
- The local G/T policies and practices would be guided by a desire to respond to the students' immediate educational needs; their well-being and personal development would be prioritized rather than a preoccupation for a long-term high return on that educational investment. [C-X]

It is a very huge dream! So, keeping in mind the tenth commandment, I will not hold my breath as I follow the evolution of gifted/talented services over the next two or three decades!

References

- Colangelo, N., Assouline, S., & Gross, M. U. M. (2004a). A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students (volume I). Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.
- Colangelo, N., Assouline, S., & Gross, M. U. M. (Eds.) (2004b). A nation deceived: How schools hold back America's brightest students (volume II). Iowa City, IA: The Connie Belin & Jacqueline N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development.
- Gagné, F. (1999). My convictions about the nature of human abilities, gifts and talents. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 22, 109-136.
- Gagné, F. (2003). Transforming gifts into talents: The DMGT as a developmental theory. In N. Colangelo, and G. A. Davis (Eds.), Handbook of gifted education, 3rd ed., 60-74. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Gagné, F. (2004). Transforming gifts into talents: the DMGT as a developmental theory. High Ability Studies, 15, 119-147.

Footnote

As the manuscript neared completion, the Templeton Foundation published a "National Report on Acceleration" (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004a, 2004b), an impressive advocacy and literature review of accelerative provisions. Both volumes of the report are available in print free of charge; they can also be downloaded in PDF format from: <http://nationdeceived.org>.