

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Opportunity, Serendipity and Commitment

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According to the eminent developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, I am currently in the *Generativity vs. Stagnation* stage of life. Throughout my career, I have been concerned with “establishing and guiding the next generation” (Erikson, 1963, p. 267), especially when it comes to promoting my values of humility, openness, transparency, inclusiveness, kindness, empathy and respect for others. This creativity profile gives me an opportunity to reflect on what I consider to be a productive career, one that I hope will have some impact on future generations. I have never been someone with a singular goal, yet have always worked hard to find ways to help others.



Developing an appreciation for exceptionalities

I have been enormously impacted by a number of people in my life. When I was in my early teens, I came upon my mother crying at the kitchen table, with papers in her hand. Her words that day have stuck with me and are, perhaps, the reason for my career in gifted education. She had just received her children’s IQ scores in the mail, all quite high, and lamented, “I just wanted my kids to be normal.” I would later learn that she had grown up in a tiny community in the mountains of

Tennessee, and was a stellar student. One day when she was sixteen, the principal called her in to his office, handed her a high school diploma, and said, “We cannot do anything else for you.” Her giftedness had come with hardship and she wanted a more “normal” life for her children. This experience became a foundation to my need to understand and assist high ability students from small rural communities; particularly, female students.

Growing up in Knoxville, Tennessee, a mid-sized Southern city, in the 1960’s and 70’s, I sensed non-normalcy in many of the people who surrounded me: my best friend’s 7-year-old loquacious older brother, who told me, “When I grow up, I’m going to be president, but first I have to go to Yale.”; the eccentric, extremely talented artists who frequented my parents’ art gallery; the framer at the gallery who could cut oval mats perfectly by freehand; my father, the entrepreneurial risk-taker; and the stage comedians he and I watched together on late-night TV from about the time I was four years old.

Those late-night shows were crystallizing experiences. My 7-year-old impersonations of numerous Jewish comics like Shecky Green, Jackie Vernon and many others, were generally well received by all. My father felt it necessary after hearing hundreds of comedy routines from me that he needed to let me know, “Tracy, buddy, you do know that we are not Jewish, don’t you?” This was news to me and I became very interested in learning what that word – Jewish – actually meant. Making people laugh using the fewest possible words, often by causing them to create images in their head, was a super power of sorts to me.

In 1968, when I was ten years old, I was watching the Mexico City Olympics on TV when Bob Beamon, an American track and field athlete, broke the world record in the long jump – not by inches, but by nearly two feet. The media and everyone I knew celebrated this astounding accomplishment, which led me to realize that giftedness was all around me. Furthermore, the variation in domains in which talent may exist fascinated me.

I lived in three worlds: my neighborhood, where the friends you had were based on geography and age; the campus of the University of Tennessee, which dominated my hometown and where I attended sporting events and worked with my parents at a university bookstore; and my family’s art gallery, called *Crossroads Art Gallery*. I had the great fortune to grow up in these different worlds, where people came from virtually all walks of life and represented diversity of all kinds.

My childhood in the 1960’s was deeply impacted by the civil rights movement. Television brought the events of the day right into our living room. Anti-war protests, assassinations, young soldiers being put in body bags, and general political upheaval – those were tumultuous times. We were also exposed to great speeches (“I have a dream...”), moon landings, and the desegregation of schools, although this was not so successful in our Southern hometown. There was hope, determination, and the possibility of change all around. An attitude of respect for the individual and the importance of acting to right the wrongs in society developed naturally out of this milieu. In reflection, I feel that all of this came together in the novels of Pat Conroy, which helped me understand what it was to be a caring and empathetic young Southern male.

I was not very excited by school as a young person. School was boring and not challenging. As long as I made straight A’s, however, my parents were happy. I describe my experience as a student as like in a control group during an experiment – never expecting anything new or interesting to happen. I did, however, enjoy sports. Large for my age, I excelled in several (baseball, football, basketball, track, tennis, golf, and bowling) and even became a three-time all-city athlete in football. Sports provided an arena in which I could push myself and be rewarded for my hard work by both success in competition and accolades from peers and the adults in my life.

Always an introverted person, I found comfort in books at an early age. I was very fortunate that my house was full of books of different types. I learned that I could escape at any time into another place. I especially enjoyed biographies.

In my junior year of high school, I met and began dating Jennifer Riedl. The daughter of an Austrian anthropologist father and a highly educated mother whose parents had immigrated to the United States from Scotland in the 1920's. Jennifer and her four siblings were all gifted. She and her family provided me with another example of non-normalcy. With exposure to her academically oriented family, academics took on a new appeal as I learned more about the possibilities of a life in letters. Indeed, I left formal athletics behind.

Then there was Bob Newhart. It stands to reason that my life would be permanently affected by a great comedian, after those early experiences with my father. Bob Newhart is a deadpan stand-up, with a sharp and deep wit. In 1972, he brought psychology into the mainstream with "The Bob Newhart Show." Newhart played Dr. Bob Hartley, a clinical psychologist, who conducted group and individual therapy sessions with eccentric patients. I suspect I am not the only person who was drawn to this field by his example. I could see myself in this role, interacting with interesting people and helping them to deal with both mundane and unusual problems they faced. When I realized that this was a direction I wanted to take, my nebulous goals began to be more focused.

After completing a 2-year degree program in management at a local community college, I enrolled at the University of Tennessee. My bachelor's degree was in education, with emphases in psychology, training, and supervision. Then my master's and doctoral programs were in educational psychology. I also obtained an Educational Specialist degree in educational psychology and guidance. Throughout this experience I reveled in learning and met some of the most important figures in my life at UT: Schuyler Huck, Howard Pollio, and Laurence (Larry) Coleman.

An impactful education

During my graduate program at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK), I was strongly attracted to measurement and psychometrics. Dr. Schuyler (Sky) Huck was an eminent statistician who took me under his wing. He was highly regarded in his field, but one of his primary objectives was to make his work accessible beyond his discipline. Understanding statistics is key to understanding social science research, and Sky's goal was to clarify statistics for the average person, rather than to leave research findings obfuscated through formulas and constructs most people could not understand. His groundbreaking book, *Reading Statistics and Research*, was first published in 1974 and is now in its sixth edition. It explains statistics in depth, by including contextual examples of their use in research.

During my doctoral studies in educational psychology, I also took all of the classes in the doctoral program in school psychology, including the testing classes in abilities, achievement, personality and projective assessments. I took all of the practicum courses and prepared for a yearlong internship that would have led to a Ph.D. in school psychology, in addition to the educational psychology Ph.D. I would soon receive. That was when Jennifer and I learned that we were going to have twins. Life changed, and while I had to suspend my studies, I was fortunate to land a good tenure line faculty position in short order. Wonderful babies: 2, second Ph.D.: 0. The best deal one could ever hope for.



One of the most meaningful experiences of my doctoral program came under the tutelage of Dr. Howard Pollio, who introduced me to phenomenology. A small group of doctoral student friends and I (in addition to interested faculty), created a weekly phenomenology research group, which has lasted at the university for decades. This research group challenged us to consider the essence of knowing: lived experience. Readings from Husserl (e.g., 1931) and Heidegger (e.g., 1927/1962) opened our eyes to the complexity of understanding what people know and how we might access that knowledge in our research. In the 1980's, positivistic research was treated as the gold standard, but qualitative research was beginning to gain ground in the social sciences. The juxtaposition of statistical methods and phenomenology was exciting and illuminating for me. Those of us who had interest in both and were trained in psychometrics learned about developing multidimensional scales based on phenomenological research.

Even though their domains were miles apart, both Sky Huck and Howard Pollio had similar objectives in their approach to research: gaining access to new knowledge through rigorous methodology. I was fortunate to learn from these two giants. Enthralled as I was by phenomenology, my testing and measurement work with Sky led to dissertation research that was more quantitative. My first idea was to study the brain waves of subjects during a novel learning task, but my mentor rejected my proposal because the technology was too new and not possible at UT. This was disappointing to me, given that I had been charged as a doctoral student in my assistantship to help develop the first course the college of education at UT would offer in "brain-based learning," or neuropsychology as we would call it today. I assisted the professor who taught it, then led the class during the third quarter. Many years later (in 2015), I received certification in neuropsychology, and that has helped satisfy my desire to understand people from this perspective. The study I performed instead for my doctorate, "An Analysis of the Testing Practices of College Professors" taught me a great deal about research methods and about how professors have little training, if any, in assessment of students' learning. While this was of interest to me, circumstances rapidly led me in a different direction.

A critical experience of my graduate education came when I volunteered to work for a rape crisis center. I had taken many courses in preparation to that end, starting from my early interest in becoming a clinical psychologist. After my time working with individuals in great distress, however, I realized that I could not detach from their negative experiences. I left each interaction disturbed by suffering that I was little able to help. I came to the conclusion that I was not well suited to be a clinical psychologist. However, helping others has remained a primary goal of mine throughout my career.

An introduction to gifted education

Research on students with gifts and talents (SWGT) can take many forms. Terman (1925), long considered the father of gifted education, collected voluminous data about each of his "geniuses" over their lifetimes. He wanted to know how they grew, who was in their lives, how healthy they were, what important transitions they underwent, and, in the end, how successful they were in society. Since Terman, many researchers have explored these and other unanswered questions about SWGT. I joined this group in 1984 when I met Larry Coleman, who introduced me to the field of gifted education. What struck me about this field is that it embodied a domain of study encompassing my prior experience with and interest in non-normalcy and excellence. Larry and I were able to blend our very different research perspectives to create an agenda that was unique in the field at the time.

I first met Larry when I was a late doctoral student completing my studies in psychology, measurement and evaluation. I never had him for a class, but my advisor recommended Larry as a potential dissertation committee member, leading to a fortuitous meeting. We immediately hit it off, spending considerable time together, deep in intellectual discussions of human experience and research methods. He was a fascinating person with a history radically different from my own. Larry was a mid-career professor of special education at UT, with a long history of working with students on both ends of the intellectual abilities continuum, from mental retardation (as described back then)

to giftedness. He and his business partner created a summer program for gifted students that is now in its fourth decade and has been taken over by their respective adult children. Larry's respect for the individual underpinned his actions in both his personal and professional life. He was committed not just to understanding individuals' experiences, but, like Sky, to sharing his knowledge in an accessible way. He believed that if you cannot make your writing accessible to everyone, you are adding unnecessary obfuscation. Individuals are empowered by access to knowledge; therefore, obtuse language supports hegemony – the opposite of Larry's goals throughout his life. Fittingly, Larry lived his values and was a *peacenik*, an active anti-war protester.

When we met in 1984, Larry was beginning his textbook, *Schooling the Gifted* (Coleman, 1985). I was fortunate to be a small part of his thinking as he wrote. I was learning about a new discipline and brought a fresh (admittedly, naïve and uninformed) perspective to the work in which he had been involved for decades.



From Left to Right – Tracy L. Cross, Larry Coleman, Don Ambrose, James Gallagher.

A dominant psychological approach among special educators in the 1970's and 80's was behaviorism. Larry's work to this point had been in the behaviorist camp, but, like other education researchers at the time, he was beginning to realize the value of qualitative research methods. As someone who cared deeply for the individuals in his research, Larry recognized the opportunities to learn from them as co-participants, instead of subordinating them through strictly positivistic methodologies. I had come to him to share my quantitative skills, but my interest in phenomenology sparked an interest in him, as well. I would later write about the politics of methodology (Cross, 1990).

Larry was hired to serve as the program evaluator of the Tennessee Governor's Schools program, a role he held for several years; he hired me to help him. After months of planning our study, we criss-crossed the state, surveying and interviewing students, teachers, counselors and administrators involved in the various Governor's School programs, but with an additional agenda that developed from our long hours of talking about what it is like to be a SWGT. *Lebenswelt*, the "life world" or, as it has come to be known, the lived experience, of these students fascinated us.

During these Governor's School visits, we interviewed countless gifted high school students. We were able to ask SWGTs directly the questions we had asked each other in our many long

meetings. One question, in particular, was associated with Larry’s concern that SWGT were not always able to be themselves in social situations. His close reading of Erving Goffman’s (1963) book, *Stigma*, clarified this experience for him. Together, we discussed the likelihood that the non-normalcy of SWGT – their exceptional intellectual or creative abilities – was a stigmatizing characteristic and that this phenomenon was significant in students’ lives. Goffman proposed, “The central feature of the stigmatized individual’s situation in life can now be stated. It is a question of what is often, if vaguely, called ‘acceptance.’” (p. 8). It was this acceptance SWGT were after.

Being different is problematic in that differentness prevents, or, at least interferes with, full social acceptance and personal development...The gifted introduce an element of differentness, because their characteristics disrupt, or are believed to have the potential to disrupt, normal social interactions. (Coleman, 1985, pp. 163-164)

Attempting to understand this phenomenon became central to much of our collaborative research (see Table 1; Coleman & Cross, 2005).

Table 1: Paradigms, Models, and Conceptions.

	Description	Proposed; Refined
Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm	SWGT want normal social interactions, but worry they will be viewed differently if others know about their giftedness, therefore manage information so as not to be exposed.	Coleman, 1985; Coleman, & Cross, 1988
Information Management Model (IMM)	Social behavior decision-making among SWGT avoiding disclosure of giftedness.	Coleman & Cross, 1988
School-Based Conception of Giftedness	Talent development model for school settings.	Coleman, & Cross, 2001, 2005; Cross & Coleman, 2005; Cross & Cross, in press
Spiral Model of Suicidal Behavior among SWGT	The progression of mental distress to the point of suicide, including risk and protective factors specific to SWGT	Cross, 2013; Cross & Cross, 2017b; Cross & Cross, 2020
School-Based Psychosocial Curriculum Model	Theoretically driven model of how schools can create curriculum that fosters positive student psychological and social development	Cross, Cross, & Andersen, 2017; Cross & Cross, 2017a

Now I am a Professor

South

My first tenure-track position was at Louisiana Tech University in Ruston, Louisiana. When my wife and I had learned our first child was to be two children, the need to move on from my graduate school experience took on a new urgency. I accepted the Tech position ABD (“All But Dissertation”), with the stipulation in my contract that I would complete the dissertation by my second year. I was an assistant professor in the Department of Behavioral Sciences, teaching psychology, research, and gifted education courses. I moved to Ruston in late August that year and our twins were born in Knoxville in October. Over the winter break, I finished my dissertation, with at least one baby asleep in my lap or over my shoulder as I worked.

The Behavioral Sciences department at Tech was full of colorful characters. I loved my time there. It was through my collaboration with some of these colleagues that I worked with at-risk high school students in a Job Training Partnership Act-funded program. I learned that, in considering their

future careers, these potential dropouts could name only four occupations to which they could aspire: police officer, teacher, minister, and professional athlete. They ruled out all of the options they could name, except for becoming a minister – if one was called to the ministry. Without such a calling, virtually all of the students in our program felt that their only option for the future was to become a professional basketball player. This was sadly ironic, as not one of the students had ever played on an organized basketball team. This lack of basic knowledge about possible futures left them unable to imagine a future to which they could aspire. From these students, I was reminded of the power of context and the need for education that supports students beyond giving them training in basic academic subjects. One must have some foundational information to be able to dream.

West

In my second tenure-track position, I worked at the University of Wyoming (UW), the only university in the 10th largest state, whose population ranks 50th in the country. As assistant professor of educational psychology, I remained active in gifted education. My colleague, Roger Stewart, joined Larry and me as we further analyzed the voluminous data we collected at the Tennessee Governor’s Schools (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993; 1995) and engaged in more interviews with SWGT (Cross & Stewart, 1995). Some of what we learned from these studies led to my confidence in the statements in Table 2. A colleague, Gary Render, was then editor for the *Journal of Humanistic Education (JHE)*. In a fortuitous collaboration, he invited me to be his co-editor of the journal. After one year as co-editor, I became the editor for another two years (1991-1993). This experience was critical to my later willingness to take on the editorships of journals in the field of gifted education.

Table 2: Things I believe about SWGT.

1	SWGT are the most heterogeneous group of students to study.
2	Most SWGT feel different in ways that over time become increasingly nuanced.
3	The most common experience of being a SWGT in school is waiting.
4	The lived experience of giftedness in school reveals concern for acceptance.
5	Identity formation is especially complicated for SWGT.
6	Schools that are not ready for SWGT create problems for them.
7	SWGT grow up receiving mixed messages from family members, teachers, and others.
8	Schools that are ready for SWGT create an atmosphere of acceptance, challenge, complexity, caring, choice, and control (see also Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003).
9	All SWGT have idiosyncratic exogenous characteristics (confluence of lived experiences and characteristics) that create a relatively unique pattern of individual needs and interests.
10	Context matters a great deal in the lives of SWGT.
11	SWGT are active agents in their lives.
12	SWGT want to have “normal” social interactions.
13	They learn that they will be treated differently once they are believed to be gifted.
14	Most SWGT engage in social coping strategies with both specific and vague goals in mind.
15	Many SWGT learn at a faster rate than their same aged non-gifted peers.
16	Many SWGT have/develop passions about learning/ interests. Some become obsessed with them.
17	SWGT benefit socially and emotionally from spending some time together.

I was active in the Wyoming Summer High School Institute, a residential program where a colleague and I created an exciting course entitled “Humor: Know Laughing Matter.” Finally, I was able to build my love of stand-up comedy into my academic life. I continued to find SWGT, many in elementary schools, who were quite exceptional. One 6-year-old girl particularly comes to mind. When I asked her to describe her experience as a student in her first-grade classroom, she proceeded to lay out for me a detailed map of the students in her class and their abilities and interests, emphasizing their expectations of her. Her social cognition at such an early age was astounding. In this wild, western state, I also met students who needed my counseling skills. One afternoon, I opened my office door to find a family waiting in the hall to see me. I later learned they would not knock on

my door out of fear they would be rejected or that others might learn of their visit with me to seek help for what they considered a very sensitive and potentially dangerous subject. They had driven from north of Casper – a three- to four-hour drive – to see me about their gay gifted son, who was struggling with depression that was at least in part associated with his exceptional abilities. There was no one in their hometown who understood his situation or would support him, with his sexual orientation that was unacceptable to them. This was not the only time I had such a visit during my four years at UW. Early exposure to suffering in this population was one reason I wrote and directed a grant that allowed for the training of school psychologists and other personnel working with special needs students, including SWGT, across Wyoming.

Midwest

In 1993, I became an associate professor of educational psychology and coordinator of research for Teachers College at Ball State University in Indiana. One of my first responsibilities was to conduct an evaluation of the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics and Humanities (Academy), a state-funded residential school for gifted high school juniors and seniors housed on Ball State's campus. Through this evaluation, I came to know the ins and outs of a school for SWGT: how they provided academic challenge, what the professors were like, and what kind of relationship the Academy had with the university.

One evening during that spring semester, Roy Weaver, the dean of Teachers College, called to tell me that an Academy student had just killed himself one block from where the students were enjoying their prom. The dean felt that he had the responsibility to inform the students of their friend's death, and he wanted me to go along and assist him. That night became the turning point in my career. For 26 years since, I have conducted research of varying types trying to learn as much as I can about the suicidal behavior of SWGT. While my colleagues and I are only beginning to scratch the surface, our studies have shed considerable light on a troubling topic that I cannot escape. I do not get through a day without worrying about it.

Two years after this event, the director of the Academy left unexpectedly and I was asked to step in – just for a few months. After a brief stint as the acting director, I was asked to stay as head of the school. I went over to help the cause for four months and stayed for nine years. This was a very different role from the professor/researcher/department chair path I had been on. It was only after serious conversations with Larry that I became convinced this was a great opportunity to learn more about the SWGT he and I cared so much about. Larry agreed to take a year of his life and conduct an ethnography at the Academy. He did this for two reasons, one because I was in over my head and so I asked him to, and another because he saw it as an opportunity to conduct another unique study for the field. There is no other book like his *Nurturing talent in high school: Life in the fast lane* (Coleman, 2005) and the field has been enriched by his year living, off and on, among the students at the Academy.

Because of my mother's limited educational experience, supporting rural SWGT has long been a goal of mine. As executive director of the Academy, I pursued grants to fund training for rural school counselors and teachers, creating a curriculum that helped them prepare students to take Advanced Placement courses. Most of these counselors and teachers held multiple roles in their rural schools. One counselor I met was actually the school's librarian, who served additionally as the schools' counselor, track coach, and bus driver. Rural schools in Indiana tend to be small and have few resources. I have always had a special concern for the students in those schools, who have ability, but little opportunity to thrive. My time at the Academy helped me develop later models and theories (see Table 1) with an eye to what is practical, considering what schools actually have to work with and the reality faced by parents and their children. Larry and I developed the school-based conception of giftedness (Cross & Coleman, 2005; Cross & Cross, in press) based on this philosophy. More recently, Jennifer and I developed the school-based psychosocial curriculum model (Cross & Cross, 2017a), applying theory to create a model that can be used to underpin a planned program of ego strength development in schools.

I was at Ball State for 16 years, serving as a faculty member, coordinator of research, department chair, and associate dean, in addition to my 9 years as executive director of the Academy. In 2000, I was named the George and Frances Ball Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Gifted Studies. Roy Weaver, dean of the Teachers College throughout my time there was immensely important to my career at Ball State and beyond. He supported me in numerous ways. When I proposed the creation of the Center for Gifted Studies and Talent Development in 1993, he provided operational support. The research I conducted at the Academy had his full support. In 2007, he provided office space and funding to support my proposal for the creation of the Institute for Research on the Psychology of Gifted Students. The trust he put in me to fulfill whatever role I engaged in at Ball State was a critical foundation to my success. In our many, many late afternoon and early evening conversations in the den of his home near campus, we brainstormed solutions to the problems of the Academy, the Teachers College, Ball State, Indiana, the US, and the world. Together, we were able to enact many of these creative solutions. I learned from Roy the importance of generating ideas. From ideas, all things are possible. Over time, I learned how to prioritize these ideas and how to make things happen. It was an exciting time in my life. I am very grateful to have had a dean who wanted to include me in his thinking and who supported me so fully.

East

In the fall of 2008, I learned that Joyce van Tassel-Baska, an icon in gifted education, was retiring from the Center for Gifted Education, which she had founded in 1988. Not only was this Center one of the best known in the world for its curriculum, precollegiate learner programs, and research; it was also at the College of William & Mary. People sometimes say that folks at William & Mary call themselves the Harvard of the South; I believe that folks at Harvard call themselves the William & Mary of the North. This mid-sized public Ivy has a vaunted reputation in the Southern US; I had heard of it even as a child. Its location in Williamsburg, Virginia – a significant place in US colonial history and a beautiful setting full of trees, rivers, and wildlife, near the Atlantic Ocean – was also appealing. I was pleased and honored to take the reins of the Center in 2009, becoming a faculty member with an endowed chair, the Jody and Layton Smith Professor in Psychology and Gifted Education, in the William & Mary School of Education. My wife, Jennifer, had completed her doctoral degree in 2008 and joined me at the Center, first as a post-doctoral researcher and then as the Center's Director of Research. The directors at the Center (Drs. Mihyeon Kim, Lori Bland, Ashley Carpenter, and Jennifer Riedl Cross) are outstanding professionals who work very hard to make the world a better place. I could not be prouder of this small but mighty team.

Humble origins, serendipity, and becoming involved in the gifted community

As a doctoral student in educational psychology, I presented my early research at regional conferences. My first solo conference presentation of work Sky Huck and I had done together was at the 1984 Midwestern Association of Teachers of Educational Psychology Conference in Muncie, Indiana. The presentation was about our efforts to teach statistics to master's degree students via a mastery learning model. The positive reception of my presentation and the general positive atmosphere were instrumental in our decision to return to Ball State University almost a decade later. I also presented regularly at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Conference for many years. My introduction to gifted education conferences came at the 1986 Council for Exceptional Children conference in New Orleans. Presenting on our evaluations of the Tennessee Governors' schools for The Association of the Gifted (TAG), I began to meet people who would become friends and colleagues in this field.

Influential friendships

My first presentation at the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), was in 1990 in Little Rock, Arkansas. Three years later, I was invited to serve on the NAGC President's Task Force on Graduate Students by then-president Dr. James J. Gallagher, one of my heroes in gifted education. This task force proved to be an important breeding ground for the organization. In addition to myself, Larry, Bonnie Cramond, Rena Subotnik, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, and, I believe, Mary Ruth Coleman (not related to Larry) were on this task force. All of us have since had important leadership

roles in NAGC and the broader field. An esprit de corps immediately developed in the group. Our objective was pure: support the development of talent and the students who were capable of exceptional performance. Our task force railed against the hegemony in our field; the opportunism of some colleagues, who were clearly there to use the organization for personal gain; the lack of access graduate students or new ideas had “at the table.” This task force became the stimulus for my future involvement in NAGC.

Larry, Rena, Paula and I became good friends. We met at conferences, talking late into the night about gifted students, our families, peace and other important topics. We often presented together at conferences and have found opportunities to work together. Rena and Paula came to the Center at BSU to provide me their take on its function, for example. Susan Johnsen at Baylor University became part of this friendship group and was also important to my professional and personal life, often serving as a wise advisor. Other friends and colleagues, including Mike Pyryt, Sal Mendaglio, Lannie Kanevsky, Sandy Kay, François Gagné, and several others, regularly participated in our late evening get togethers. Everyone’s doctoral students were also welcome.

Many others have become my friends and have been influential in my career. Joel Macintosh has been a friend and colleague for 25 years. His impact on the field of gifted education is immense and he took on this passion with considerable panache. My early involvement with Joel began as he made the transition of *The Prufrock Journal* into the *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education (JSGE)*; now *Journal of Advanced Academics*. Joel agreed to my becoming the first ongoing editor of *JSGE*, which proved to be a catalyst in my career. Don Ambrose is the purest academic I know. I am honored that he accepted my invitation to contribute his perspective to this profile. He is extremely well read, thoughtful, original in his thinking, and as kind and supportive as a person can be. Talking with Don changes my thinking and lifts my spirits. In 2011, I met my friend and colleague, Colm O’Reilly, Director of the Centre for Talented Youth in Dublin, Ireland. We began collaborating regularly and have completed several projects, with more currently in progress. Colm’s skills include an astonishingly effective way of working with and leading others. He has emerged as a highly influential leader in gifted education in Western Europe. Colm and Rena are the two individuals who seem to have connected most of the professionals who collaborate in the field.

Larry, Joel, Jim Gallagher, Paula, Joyce, Rena, Roy, Don and Colm all have been influential in my career in gifted education; each in their own way. Their generosity toward me for more than a quarter of a century changed my life. In Larry’s case, it was across 35 years. While never technically one of Larry’s students, I was always a student of Larry.

Volunteer work

My desire to make a difference led me to volunteer in many capacities. I learned early that, if I wanted to have an effect on what happens to and for SWGT, I would need to be present when decisions were made. Over the years, I have been on numerous school and organizational boards. I served as president of the Wyoming Association for Gifted Education, the Indiana Association for the Gifted, NAGC, and twice for The Association for the Gifted (TAG) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). One momentous experience came when I was early in my time at Ball State and was invited to join the board of the Roeper School. This Detroit-area school, founded by George and Annemarie Roeper in 1941, has a mission like no other: to prevent another Holocaust. Its dedication to the well-being of its SWGT and the development of their social consciousness aligned with my philosophy and values. At one of the first of many board meetings I attended, I remember being in the cafeteria line with Harry Passow on my left and Nancy Robinson on my right. This was an exciting and humbling experience for a young, aspiring gifted education researcher. I knew I was in a special place.

Service to my professional community was extremely important to me. I made many personal sacrifices to be present at faculty, university, and organizational meetings. I wanted these institutions to be successful in their goals. If I did not give 100%, how could I expect others to do so? I have, at times, stepped away from professional organizations (or individuals) when I was unable to bring

about change and felt my values were being compromised by continued involvement. Fortunately, this has been infrequent in my career.

The editor in me

Anyone in academia learns early about the importance of the peer-review process. A young faculty member discovers that reviewers can be harsh or helpful – sometimes, both. I had plenty of these experiences. It was the early experience with *JHE* that taught me just how a research journal works. The process of inviting reviewers to examine the merits of a piece was laid out in full during those early years, first as co-editor and then as editor of this small, now defunct, journal. I believed in the goals of the Association for Humanistic Education and wanted *JHE* to be widely read. I learned about the generosity of reviewers, who were volunteering their time to help determine the works that would be published or not. I could see before me the opportunity to offer a platform for voices to be heard. Editors can encourage these voices or squelch them, simply by choosing to invite one reviewer or another. I could see this in our own field, when manuscripts I had submitted languished or sped through the process. Dominance of the field happens when editors make the decision to support one or another type of manuscript. Sometimes an editor is inclined to support or reject a type of author or a particular research methodology. I was determined to be positive in my editor roles – maintaining high expectations while giving opportunities to those who were willing to try. Writing is hard for many academics, but skills improve with practice. A poorly written piece with profound ideas or groundbreaking research can be improved. Through the work of volunteer reviewers and the editorial staff, I saw many diamonds in the rough polished to a publishable luster. As Larry once told me, anything you have ever read had an editor who improved it. I learned a great deal by witnessing the evolution of ideas in a manuscript, from what was initially submitted to what was actually published. Seeing manuscripts in the field evolve through the review process provides a very rare and privileged perspective on the authors and their work.

Following my term at *JHE*, I served as guest editor of special issues in the *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education (JSGE)*. I took on editorial roles when I could, becoming column editor for *Gifted Child Today* and the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. I was concurrently editor of Prufrock Press's *JSGE* and the Ball State journal *The Teacher Educator (TTE)*. Both of these small journals were modest when I began, receiving too few submissions and barely managing to make their quarterly publication goals. I learned how to encourage authors and reviewers to not only submit, but to make revisions and meet deadlines. Both journals were in a healthy state when I completed my editorship. *TTE* is now a well-respected journal, managed by a major publisher. When the editorship of NAGC's premier research publication, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, opened in 1997, I was not sure I was ready, despite these earlier successes. It was Jim Gallagher, a man I so greatly admired, who encouraged me to throw my hat in the ring. I served as editor of this esteemed publication for five years and I believe that I was fair in my decisions. Manuscripts were received and processed in the order received, rather than by any rating or preference on my part. I encouraged diverse authors to submit their work and made great efforts to foster diversity in the journal. The field was enhanced by this guiding philosophy and the journal developed a healthy production schedule. I am very proud of the fact that I published the first papers of many of the field of gifted education's most respected academics.

The *Roeper Review (RR)*, like the Roeper School, had a unique mission in gifted education publications: “to publish thought-provoking, informative articles that deal with research, observation, experience, theory and practice as they relate to growth, emotions, and education of gifted and talented learners and to the cultures in which they live” (<https://www.roeper.org/about/the-roeper-institute/the-roeper-review>). Readers turn to *RR* for a different perspective, outside the mainstream research found in other journals. When its long-time editor, Ruthann Brodsky, retired, I was asked to step in as her successor. Once again, I was wearing two hats, as editor of both *GCQ* and *RR* – this at the time when I was executive director of the Academy, president of the Indiana Association for the Gifted, president of CEC-TAG, on the board of numerous organizations, and (did I mention?) father of four young children. My hat collection was quite large.

My term as editor for, first GCQ, then RR ended, just at the time that Larry was finishing a 12-year term as editor of the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted (JEG)*. My appointment as editor of JEG resulted in my longest term of 13 years. In that time, I saw major changes in the publication arena. For-profit publishers have identified research journals as a lucrative opportunity. Authors now submit their articles through publisher-provided portals, making more work for authors, while reducing the staffing required to run the journal. Pressure to publish has pushed more authors to submit manuscripts and this sometimes resulted in subpar work. Language issues were a frequent challenge as more international manuscripts were submitted. Along with these challenges have come the benefits of having multiple new voices in our publications and many outlets that extend the reach of authors in our field.

What I have learned

In my career in gifted education, I have learned many things: about people, programs, research, and teaching. There is, literally, too much to fit in this space. I have come to the conclusion that gaining knowledge is self-indulgent unless it is shared. From a casual dinner one evening with Robert Sternberg many years ago, I learned of the importance of publishing in wide ranging journals, so that your research will potentially reach audiences across the spectrum and may actually be utilized. Of course, he said it in a much more elegant manner. I have tried to share what I have learned in writing for and speaking to audiences of all sorts. I will focus below on two broad areas in which I have spent the most time in my career: lived experience and suicide.

Lived Experience. If we really want to understand what it is like to be a SWGT – what are the perils and rewards, the barriers and supports to their success in school and in life? – there is no substitute for listening to them describe their lives. Surveys and analysis of “big data” can offer a glimpse into their experiences. I have determined that, although we can learn from positivistic methods, they are constrained by their inherent parameters, thus limited in their ability to contribute to our knowledge on this particular topic. Rigorous qualitative inquiry allows for a richness missing from positivist approaches. There is no piece of which I am more proud than a recently published article in *RR* (Cross, Cross, Dudnytska, Kim, & Vaughn, 2020) in which we used the accumulated work of qualitative researchers (Coleman, Micko, & Cross, 2015). This manuscript was Larry’s final juried manuscript and was published after his unexpected death in 2013. His doctoral student at the time, Karen Micko, contacted me when the manuscript she was co-authoring with Larry was early in its development and asked me if there was anything that could be done posthumously. What a small but fitting way to honor Larry: completing the manuscript and seeing it through publication. Later this same paper was used to clarify the risk factors for suicide that are unique to SWGT (Cross et al., 2020). Because of the qualitative research that went before, I am able to include these factors in my spiral model of suicide among SWGT (Cross & Cross, 2019).

Now, do not let this persuade you that I am only interested in qualitative research. I learned a great deal from the standardized instruments we used to explore the psychology of SWGT (Cassady & Cross, 2006; Cross, Cassady, & Miller, 2006; Cross et al., 2018). The early work Larry and I did to identify just how uncomfortable SWGT become in certain social situations, so much so that some of them will lie rather than be exposed as gifted, was based on a survey of students in the Tennessee Governor’s Schools (Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991). However, this survey was developed after we had talked with countless SWGT about their social experiences. A guiding principle for me has been Oliver Cromwell’s (1650) exhortation: “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.” It is when we think we *know* something that we need to be reminded of this. I am confident that my understanding, appreciation, and use of both positivistic and qualitative research approaches have served me well in my roles as editor of seven different journals and multiple edited books.

Suicide. On the night in the spring of 1994 when I accompanied the dean to the Academy prom, I learned that another student who had spent a brief time at the Academy had killed himself a few months previously, while in a mental health facility. Two months after the prom, a third Academy student died by suicide. After the cluster of suicides at the Academy, a task force was created to learn

about why they had occurred and to make recommendations to avoid future suicides. The work of the task force led to changes in the Academy's policies. After admission, we asked parents to provide detailed information about their children's mental health and to share any experiences that may affect it (e.g., death of a loved one, divorce, etc.). The school was prepared through training of everyone at the Academy and adding staff to rapidly respond to distressed students. Through frequent convocations, students learned to overcome their belief that it was wrong to tell adults when their friends expressed suicidal ideation, adopting the mantra, "It is better to have a live enemy than a dead friend." Our proactive approach has meant that no suicides have occurred at the Academy since implementing the task force's recommendations more than 25 years ago. We shared information broadly, in publications (e.g., Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996) and presentations, in the hopes of preventing suicide at other residential schools. In 1996, under my editorship, a special guest edited issue of *JSGE* (volume 7, issue 3) focused on suicide of SWGT.

Since being a part of the task force, I have continued to conduct research on suicidal ideation with colleagues (Cassady & Cross, 2006; Cross, Cassady & Miller, 2006; Cross et al., 2020; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002; Gust & Cross, 1998; Gust-Brey & Cross, 1999) and share what I have learned with others (e.g., Cross & Cross, 2018; Cross & Andersen, 2015; Cross & Cross, 2017b). People frequently ask me if SWGT die by suicide more often than their peers. Although we do not know with certainty, indications are that they do not. Some risk factors that can lead to suicidal behaviors are associated with giftedness (Cross et al, 2020; Cross & Cross, 2019). There are unique pressures and experiences no one else can have. In the wrong confluence of characteristics and events, suicidal behavior is possible. It is imperative that we learn more about suicide among SWGT to avoid not only the loss of the student, or the loss to the family or community, but also the loss of their potential contributions generally. With the current level of suicide across age groups at approximately 45,000 people per year, we cannot even imagine the loss all of these people to the culture and future of the US.



Family members

The unvarnished truth or the editor's editor

Anyone who knows me, could share that I am that rare, fortunate person who has had a life partner for four decades. In essence, I have grown up with Dr. Jennifer Riedl Cross in my corner since we were 16 and 15 years old, respectively. In our 40 years of marriage, we have supported each other in the other's goals, ideas and dreams. She has made considerable sacrifices for me and my career, that have enabled me to work on the things described in this paper. Part of the lesser known story is that Jennifer has always helped me with my academic work. For example, she has quite literally edited everything that I have submitted for publication. She helped me think through ideas, while offering critiques in real time. For the past 10 years, we have been able to work more directly as colleagues. Her academic work while at William & Mary has been outstanding, finally providing her a vehicle to show the world what she can do. The Center for Gifted Education would not be where it is today without her scholarship over the past decade. There is an old joke about who was the better dancer, Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers. The punchline is that Ginger Rogers is, because she can do all that he does, backwards and in high heels. This joke is characteristic of a lesser known giant whose shoulders have supported me for 45 years, Dr. Jennifer Riedl Cross. Like Ginger Rogers, she is the better academic because she has done her work in the shadows, with no attention, little support, while raising four children, being in graduate school for many years, moving multiple times for my career, putting on hold her academic aspirations—all for me. She writes better than me, she is better organized, many of her ideas are better than mine, and she keeps me from going off the rails. The unvarnished truth about whatever success I may have had in my career is due to the fact that... I married quite well.

Conclusion

When I received the 2011 NAGC Distinguished Scholar Award, I was given the opportunity to speak about my career. My presentation was a list, taken directly from my vita, of 62 co-authored publications. I also have many single-authored publications, but I see the co-authored publications as an important part of my legacy. Larry Coleman once told me, "People around you seem to do quite well." I hope that I have made a difference in the lives of those around me by providing opportunities that were made possible by my efforts and the generosity shown to me by my friends and colleagues. This is true for SWGT, their teachers, the counselors who serve them, their parents or others who care for them, faculty members, board members, school administrators, the list goes on and on. In the end, none of my successes were accomplished alone. I have learned what I have by standing on the shoulders of giants. This includes my parents, their parents, Jennifer, Roy, Larry and all those mentioned previously. I believe in leading by example and have attempted to live my life that way. While always wishing that I was less introverted, and with a better personality, I hope that I made up for my shortcomings by working on behalf of others for the past 40 years. All of this has been to help develop the talents and psychological well-being of SWGT, that they may achieve their potential. My father was probably right when he said that I have a "quiet but thundering enthusiasm" for what I do. I hope that all these efforts will improve others' lives.

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