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Counselor's Corner: An Interview with Tim Stambaugh

Tracy L. Cross
William & Mary, tlcross@wm.edu

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Interview

Counselor's Corner: An Interview With Tim Stambaugh

Tim Stambaugh, Ph.D.
Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D.

In this ongoing series of interviews highlighting outstanding counselors with expertise in the emotional needs of gifted and talented youth, Dr. Tracy Cross spoke with Dr. Tim Stambaugh his career and philosophies. Dr. Stambaugh has been a member of the faculty at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee for more than a decade, as a practicing clinical counselor.

Dr. Tim Stambaugh

Cross • *Please tell us about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to college? Tell us about your professional life. How did you get interested in serving students with gifts and talents?*

Stambaugh • As a high schooler in rural central Ohio, and considering which college to attend, I didn't realize counseling, in the form I now practice, was a career, let alone something I would find so rewarding. My family's business, building golf courses, provided me with great experiences working with my hands and with heavy machinery. I enjoyed the work, but knew I wanted something different. A strong work ethic was developed that I value even today.

When I began my higher education at Ohio Christian University and discovered counseling as a helping profession, I became convinced it was the path for me. My master's program as Asbury Theological Seminary and additional work at Ohio University gave me great experiences and prepared me to begin my work in a community agency in southeast Ohio. My wife was starting her career as a classroom teacher at the same time. She quickly become very involved in the local school's gifted program as a teacher and administrator. As we talked about the learning and social-emotional needs of gifted students, I often received calls from parents to offer support. Because of an awareness of the characteristics of gifted students I have often been able to quickly build a working relationship. One clear example is seen when talking with students and parents who say they feel heard in our work, something that doesn't happen often in their experience.

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Address correspondence to Tim Stambaugh, MA, LPC, Ph.D., Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 1211 Medical Center Drive, Nashville, TN 37232. Email: tim.stambaugh@vumc.org

Cross • *How would you describe your counseling practice?*

Stambaugh • I have been counseling for almost 30 years. In addition to my community agency experience where I primarily saw children and adolescents, I have worked in a private practice and currently work in the child and adolescent division of the department of psychiatry at a university medical center. My practice has, at times, been narrow on the theme of anxiety and at other times very broad as I was one of only two counselors providing services in county where we lived. Regardless of the setting, working with gifted students and their families has always been intriguing and rewarding.

Cross • *What have you found to be the most common issues that students with gifts and talents bring to your practice? What changes have you seen over the years?*

Stambaugh • It bears repeating that gifted students are, as many writers have noted, at least as well adjusted as their nongifted peers. My practice and my own research have shown this consistently. When gifted students do reach out for help, the symptoms are not uncommon, but there is a difference because of the complexity and intensity of their feelings.

I have found that gifted students, or parents on the student's behalf, seek help with feelings that have complex etiologies. When students become aware of local and global issues they often feel overwhelmed. Their ability to think deeply and understand the multiple implications of a situation can lead to great pain. When someone becomes aware of a problem and begins to imagine with great depth and complexity the many ways a social issue can negatively affect them, symptoms quickly escalate. I have found that most often gifted students are more aware of and intensely upset about the global impacts than more personal or local implications. A common factor that complicates the feelings is the awareness they have little to no control to change the situation.

Gifted students also tend to see far reaching implications compared to their age-mates. I frequently hear students report worry about an upcoming test, not necessarily whether they will do well, but how if they do

not do well it will negatively impact their grade, and then what level of class they will be offered next year which also impacts their high school courses, then college acceptance letters, programs, internships and finally their career path. In their view, their long-term career success falls squarely on the score of their 4th grade math test. Assuming the worst is not uncommon for anyone experiencing anxiety and depression, but the complexity and potential specific long term implications imagined by a gifted student maximizes the number of dominoes that could fall.

Cross • *What empowers counselors to be most effective within our counseling practice with gifted and talented students?*

Stambaugh • Having respect for a gifted student's individuality creates a positive relationship. It enables us, as providers, to join with them where they are and not make assumptions about them. Armed with little knowledge of the characteristics of gifted, it can be tempting to tell them what they must be feeling, and thus make it easy to offer solutions. This approach is not likely to go well. Work will be more effective when we set aside stereotypes and allow the student to be real. He may feel compelled to impress you. She may want to avoid showing a weakness. When the student sees your attempt to come alongside and avoid making assumptions, work will be more fluid and productive.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is a common modality among many counselors and can be effective with gifted students, but there is a caveat. It is important to use the intervention in an age-appropriate manner while giving a reasonable consideration for asynchrony. It is tempting to just treat the gifted student like an adult because they use advanced vocabulary and have above age level thinking. With practice, a clinician can deliver intervention services to the level of the student's ability to understand and process intellectually, socially, and emotionally, among other domains.

Cross • *What topics are you most concerned about currently?*

Stambaugh • Several topics come to mind. One is perfectionism. Whether based on the expectations of parents, teachers, friends, or from within, perfectionism continues to be a common topic of work in my office. Currently, students have been initially frustrated and in time benefitted from working toward giving themselves permission to be imperfect. This topic stings at first. I often hear questions such as "so are you saying you want me to make mistakes?" Such pressure to be right or to prove one's value through impressing others often leads to an unwillingness to take the natural and necessary risks for learning. I work diligently to create space for taking a risk when the outcome is not obvious. That fear of failing or not being seen as "the smart girl" because she didn't quickly know what to do next can be paralyzing. When I give permission to not know and work toward knowing, gifted students generally become open and willing, but that ship does not turn easily.

As I mentioned previously, gifted students can be skilled at the cognitive distortion of catastrophizing. It can be easy to see many negative outcomes growing from a situation. Using cognitive skills to recognize and challenge the perception while validating the painful feelings is effective when the counselor doesn't get overwhelmed or starstruck by the complexity of the student's dilemma.

Another common theme is the guilt some feel for not living up to their own expectations. Lately I have noticed a shift away from complaints that parents and teachers place unrealistic expectations on gifted students. Instead, there is a rise in the internal expectation. This leads to working on finding their identity outside of their performance and to developing healthy relationships with their friends based on shared interests and not just competition over who scored the highest or who is taking the most Advanced Placement classes. Helping students to be aware of their internal beliefs about themselves and to recognize when they are not being fair can lead to more reasonable expectations and progress toward relief.

These patterns have their obvious implications, but can also apply to any concern a gifted student may have. Gifted students may not know why they are struggling, but also may be overwhelmed by the lack of governmental effort on climate change. They may not know how to come out to their parents or want to be sure their LGBT friends know they are an ally. They may also question the meaning of their lives and whether they can have an influence on the future of society. These are important concerns, but become much more complicated if they must handle them perfectly, have unrealistic expectations, or catastrophize the outcomes.

As I talk about these common themes, I want to also be clear that biological factors also exist and impact the wellbeing of gifted students. Emotional pain does not only come from distortions or unrealistic expectations. When neurological and biochemical factors are present, I have found gifted students frustrated their doctor wants them to take medication. Some believe they should be able to solve this on their own, like they do all the problems they face in life. Empowering students to use all available resources to find relief can be another example of how work in the counseling office can translate across the lifespan to address myriad stressors.

A final thought is that while individual work in a counseling session is a common approach when a child or adolescent is reporting difficult feelings, incorporating work with parents also very important. Parents frequently ask for help and state, "I just don't know what to do anymore. I've tried everything." Educating parents on healthy expectations and recognizing overt and covert

demands is valuable. Sometimes parents want to outargue their child and this often leads to power struggles as the gifted child may be convinced of his position and able to offer a more compelling argument than the parent. Empowering parents to see an issue from the perspective of their child can open communication and increase teamwork. A specific example of the parent's influence comes when they own their fallibility, giving permission, through experience instead of lecture, that mistakes are acceptable and can lead to growth instead of a source of shame to be hidden. Oftentimes parents have reported they had similar challenges growing up and found unhealthy coping skills that need to change. "I need this counseling as much as he does" is a common refrain.

Cross • *What should everybody know about the social and emotional needs of gifted individuals?*

Stambaugh • Organizations like SENG work hard to support gifted students and their families on many necessary topics and I haven't found many new arenas of concern. What I wish more people understood was the dramatic impact the social and emotional needs can have. My research has shown that factors like connections with friends, perceptions of boredom and belonging, and whether students believe their work has the right amount of challenge makes a significant difference on feelings of anxiety and depression. These factors matter. They are not just talking points for a parent support group or topics for additional reading in a graduate level class for teachers. It is important for parents and teachers to work with gifted students to have access to like-minded peers. It is important for students to have work that is meaningful, interesting, and not too easy. A perception of belonging matters for gifted students. A gifted student once told me "When I'm with other gifted students I fit in. When I'm not, I don't." These social and emotional needs have to be addressed and the good news is that we know this, and there are many pathways for taking steps forward.

Cross • *What are common misperceptions about the social and emotional needs of gifted students?*

Stambaugh • "Gifted students will be fine on their own" is a common misconception about learning needs, but it also applies to social and emotional needs. Struggling students may "fake well" and not reach out due to introversion or not wanting to be seen as weak and unable to solve a problem, but that doesn't mean they don't need support. Check in and give them a space to be real.

Because of their high abilities, some believe gifted students must be happy, proud of their work, and hopeful about the future. While these may be true for some, they are certainly not true for all. Our effort to validate the pain of students who are seeking help and normalize deep questions, even at an early age, can show the value of openness as well as recognizing and combating our own unrealistic expectations.

Cross • *As you reflect on your career working with gifted students, what are the most important professional lessons that you have learned?*

Stambaugh • Two thoughts come to mind. One was a humbling experience that occurred several years ago when a gifted student was becoming open about the difficulty he had with an injustice he observed. We discussed how sensitivity to injustice is not uncommon among the gifted and we explored healthy options for coping as well as actions he could take to bring change. As he applied our work to other injustices, he slowed his rate and volume of speech at one point. He began to discuss something that was very important to him, but it was a topic I personally did not find unjust. His opinion was different than mine and I didn't understand what made this topic so intense for him. As he honestly unpacked his concern, he recognized that I found the issue to be at best, minor. He was frustrated with me and said he wasn't sure we could work together if I did not agree with him. I have always worked to value my clients, even when we are not on the same page so I was surprised that he could read something in my voice or affect that caught his attention. We were able to recover and find a common ground that allowed us to proceed with our work. I'm glad he continued to make progress and achieve his treatment goals, but moving forward I have always sought to see why a concern is meaningful, to keep a curious mindset, even when at face value I don't see the same level of concern. It was meaningful to him. What was that topic? He struggled to make peace with the idea of keeping fish in an aquarium. It struck him as torturous to the fish.

Another lesson that seems obvious now is that working with the entire family is most often necessary. To help the student, parents, and oftentimes, siblings understand the underlying concerns of the student is powerful in the change process. This allows parents to face the challenges from a strength instead of deficit position. Parents also can make shifts in discipline, whether accommodations are necessary, and very importantly, how to advocate and help their child advocate for getting her needs met, especially at school.

Cross • *If you were to advise aspiring clinical counselors and psychologists about working with gifted individuals, what would you share with them?*

Stambaugh • Respect the autonomy of the gifted student without assuming stereotypes. This seems obvious, but in our best efforts to manage biases, it can be easy to minimize the social and academic needs of gifted

students. Assume the stance of a learner to create a non-threatening environment.

Gifted students have many people in their lives who expect them to have all the answers and to be right. Don't be one of those people. Give them room for their struggle, validate their journey, and work together to find pathways for change toward empowerment and peace.

Cross • *Given that most doctoral programs in psychology do not offer formal training in gifted education, giftedness, gifted psychology and so forth, how should we prepare psychologists to work with students with gifts and talents?*

Stambaugh • Many ideas come to mind on this topic, but here is one that doesn't get enough attention: Don't worry about trying to be the smartest person in the room. Self-discovery for the student is more important than showing that you can tell them what is wrong or why they feel badly. One example of this comes up when playing games in a counseling session. Games can be clinically useful for many reasons, but if I get my feelings hurt by losing at chess to a 5 year old, we will have a difficult time working together. I think it is more important to come alongside and join them on their journey. We will certainly work on coping skills and being real with feelings, but I don't want to focus on solving one problem at a time as I impress them with my prowess. By coming alongside and joining them where they are we open the door to the application of our work long after they leave the office.

Also, if you were identified as a gifted student yourself, remember that your experience may be very similar or very different than the client in front of you.

Cross • *What have I not asked you that you would like to share with us?*

Stambaugh • One last thought is about how powerful it is to affirm a gifted student who has been vulnerable. This may be the first time they have been this open with someone and you will create a safe environment that shows you value them even when they may be quite upset with themselves. Affirmation can lead to confidence in taking healthy risks with social and academic opportunities instead of only doing what they know they will be good at.

Tim Stambaugh, Ph.D., is an Associate in Psychiatry and Behaviorial Sciences and a clinical counselor at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Department of Psychiatry. He has nearly 30 years of experience in community mental health and private practice settings. He specializes in working with children and adolescents with anxiety and depression symptoms as well as students who are academically gifted. His research focuses on the social and emotional health of gifted students, particularly how boredom, belonging, friendships, and academic match are related to depression and anxiety. Stambaugh received his PhD in clinical counseling, teaching, and supervision from Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee.