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Homeschooled Students Bring Own Set of Skills to University Campuses

Ali P. Gordon
University of Central Florida, ali@ucf.edu

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Homeschooled Students Bring Own Set of Skills to University Campuses

By Ali P. Gordon

UCF Forum columnist

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Key questions always loom large for parents of homeschooled, college-bound students, such as: “What happens when my child actually gets to the university level? Will they be able to keep up?”

As a faculty member, I get the chance to interact with a variety of undergraduates in a number of ways, principally in the classroom and the engineering research laboratory that I direct.

The inherent beauty of the classroom setting is that all the students are there to increase their knowledge base regardless of their prior experiences. We learn more from people who are different from us than we do from people who are similar, so it would stand to reason, therefore, that if homeschoolers are adding to classroom discussions and questions, then that would enhance everyone’s learning outcome to some degree.

In large classes, however, it’s virtually impossible to discern much about an individual student’s background. By means of talking with students after class or during office hour meetings, I’ve gotten to know many students individually over the years. Cumulatively, I’ve developed a very positive view of the homeschooled, and they seem to do well in classes.

A 2009 study by researcher Michael Cogan found that retention rates, graduation rates, and initial GPAs were higher among homeschooled versus non-homeschooled students in college.

In the research laboratory, students and I explore complex phenomena. We search for knowledge and carry out systematic investigations to establish new facts. Along the way, students will undoubtedly have to master one or perhaps several new concepts, software packages or device platforms. Quite often a researcher might be compelled to synthesize some tools to allow for the development and acquisition of new data. Students who can creatively solve challenges with a higher degree of autonomy seem to excel at making discoveries.

Parent-educated students that I’ve met exhibit a strong intellectual vitality and passion for exploring difficult concepts. On the average, they have a penchant for open-ended problem solving. It is plausible that in their homeschool environments, they’ve already

been given a vast number of opportunities to grow their capacities for self-direction. Consequently, their inclination for independent study seamlessly transfers to the scholarly research environment.

When I first learned about the practice of homeschooling, my impulse reaction a decade ago was not enthusiastic. After all, I wasn't homeschooled and (*I think*) I turned out OK. My main arguments centered on how homeschooled students would learn to socialize and learn to communicate effectively. Also, how are these students going to pick up good study habits?

These are some of the most common misapprehensions with which parent educators are confronted. Moms and dads of homeschooled kids often have to defend their decisions to relatives, friends and even strangers. The fact is that many individuals simply don't know much about the approach to learning or are misinformed. Recent data generated from formal research studies has not only begun to debunk these misconceptions, but also point to strongly positive outcomes for the students.

Home education is by a parent or a tutor outside of the traditional public or private school. This is usually carried out in the primary residence, a library, or even outside. Parents point to many reasons for choosing homeschooling. Religious reasons, academic interest in non-traditional approaches to education, and enhancing family relationships are common.

On standardized college entrance exams, the homeschooled have scored, on average, at the 65th to 80th percentile on standardized academic achievement tests compared to the national average based on public school data. University officials have more recently recognized the value added by bringing these students to their campuses and attract them with separate entrance application sites with slightly modified guidelines, such as at the University of Central Florida, Georgia Tech, Stanford and Arizona State.

Each university campus is a potpourri blending students, faculty and staff with varied backgrounds.

Such diversity benefits classrooms as well as laboratories, and schools offer a window to the world. Homeschooled students have and will continue to add to the richness of our individual and collective experiences.

Dr. Ali P. Gordon is an associate professor in UCF's Department of Mechanical & Aerospace Engineering. He can be reached at ali@ucf.edu.

