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Programming for Talent Development: What's Unique About the Four Levels of Service?

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At the Center for Creative Learning, we have been working with individualized programming for more than two decades, and specifically with the concept of Levels of Service (LoS) in programming for talent development for more than 15 years. Throughout that time, three questions stand out as being among the most frequently raised about the LoS model. These are:

(1.) Do the four levels describe students with different levels of ability, talent, or giftedness?

(2.) Why are all four levels relevant to gifted/talented programming? Aren't Levels III and IV the points at which it really becomes "gifted" programming?

(3.) What are really the unique attributes of each of the four levels?

Throughout our work on our new (forthcoming) book on LoS for Prufrock Press, in which we will describe and discuss LoS in greater depth and detail than in any previous publication, we have given these questions considerable attention. In practice, we've been confident in our ability to deal with those issues, but it is often when you seek to write something down clearly and completely for publication that you face the challenge of expressing it as thoroughly and accurately as possible. In this article, we'll provide an "advance preview," albeit in condensed form because of space constraints, of our responses to these questions as we framed them for the book.

Do the four levels describe students with different levels of ability, talent, or giftedness?

No. The four levels describe services— programming activities or educational experiences— that schools can provide, in different combinations and ways, for different students (as appropriate and necessary), at different times. Various students, depending on their characteristics, needs, interests, and experiences might benefit from any of the levels at any time, or even from the same level at a specific time and place. An individual student might, during the course of several weeks, months, or even years, participate in programming at all four levels. The levels of service describe multiple ways in which we might recognize and nurture students' strengths, talents, or sustained interests, not "kinds" of students or degrees of ability. We might speak of a student for whom Level IV activities are appropriate and challenging, but we do not speak of a "Level IV Student" as if that represented some categorical identity.

It is true that there are fewer students who, at any time and in relation to any activities or services, will be involved in Level III services, and fewer still whose needs will call for a particular Level IV activity. By contrast, Level I activities reach all students, and Level II

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services involve many students. However, it is important to keep in mind that the number of students that any activity serves is not determined by a preset percentage or eligibility quota; rather, it is a reflection of the nature of the services themselves. As the services become focused more specifically on characteristics and readiness in relation to a specific talent area, the number of students for whom any activity is appropriate will change. Educators do not start out by saying, for example, "We can only permit 2% of our students to be served at Level IV." Instead, as they observe specific characteristics and needs in a student that can best be met through Level IV services, they will take the steps necessary to provide the services.

Why are all four levels relevant to gifted/talented programming? Aren't Levels III and IV the points at which it really becomes "gifted" programming?

Each of the four levels of service involves a unique and important way of differentiating instruction in relation to students' strengths, talents, and interests. For that reason, all four levels contribute in important and essential ways to the school's overall talent development efforts.

Level I provides skills and tools that create an important foundation for talent development, such as creative thinking skills (and tools for generating options), critical thinking skills (and tools for focusing options), Creative Problem Solving, and basic research or inquiry skills. The skills and tools all students learn in Level I will contribute to their ability to recognize and deal with opportunities in areas of their strengths, interests, and talents over time. Level I also involves assessing and clarifying students' personal characteristics, interests, and learning style preferences, helping parents, teachers, and the students themselves to understand their strengths and to clarify the ways in which they can "be their best." Finally, Level I activities expose students to many different topics and experiences, creating a starting point for clarifying and developing strengths, talents, and interests.

Level II involves opportunities for students to explore themes, topics, or talent areas about which they have an initial curiosity or for which they demonstrate interest or aptitude as observed by parents, teachers, or others. Level II activities provide students with experiences that may be deeper, more challenging, or sustained over a longer period of time (in comparison with the brief duration of Level I activities). Through their involvement in Level II activities, students can put their skills and interests to the test, confirm or disconfirm their interest in future work in a specific area, or identify other new directions (or "spin-off" possibilities) to pursue. At the same time, Level II activities can be sufficiently finite in duration that a student is not required to make a long-term commitment to an area that might not really hold promise for them or sustain their interest and enthusiasm.

In these ways, we see both Levels I and II as a "staging platform" for the emergence and development of specific talent areas for any student. They are essential to the overall talent recognition and development process because they can help create or clarify promising opportunities and directions for students to pursue.

Levels III and IV, in which the focus shifts to linking students with programming opportunities based on their unique needs and characteristics, represent services that are clearly related to our traditional approaches to "gifted programming." However, it is important to recognize that the services students need often build on Level I and II experiences. The Level I and II activities may also provide an excellent "window" for discovering or observing needs for Level III or IV

services. It's also important to keep in mind that the selection of students for activities in Levels III or IV is based on specific characteristics and needs for the activities, rather than on global scores (such as an IQ "cutoff" score).

What are really the unique attributes of each of the four levels?

The charts accompanying this article summarize the unique attributes of each of the four Levels of Service, and offer examples (that are illustrative, not comprehensive) for each level. Longtime readers will note that these charts represent an updating and expansion of the "four concentric squares" graphic that we have used for several years to describe the four levels. We hope the expanded graphics extend and clarify your understanding of the uniqueness and power of each level.

Level I is unique in being concerned with exposure. Level I services deal with appropriate and challenging content and process for all learners, and emphasize the importance of recognizing and responding to individual differences and of the need to guide students in learning specific process tools as well as content skills. Level II's uniqueness arises from deliberate efforts to engage and stimulate students to test or apply their strengths, through invitational opportunities, exploring new topics, and "digging deeper" into one or more talent areas. Level II helps students to verify their emerging talent possibilities. Level III offers group-oriented services, within the school or through other agencies, to help students reach a higher level of accomplishment and build their competence and commitment in a particular talent area or domain. Finally, Level IV recognizes and responds to an individual's "blossoming expertise," providing individually tailored services that help the student rise to an outstanding level of talent development, expression, and productivity.

Note. The forthcoming book mentioned in this article is: Treffinger, D. J., Young, G. C., Nassab, C. A., & Wittig, C. V. (2003, in press). *Programming for talent development: The levels of service approach.* Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Programming for Talent Development:
"Levels of Service [LoS]"

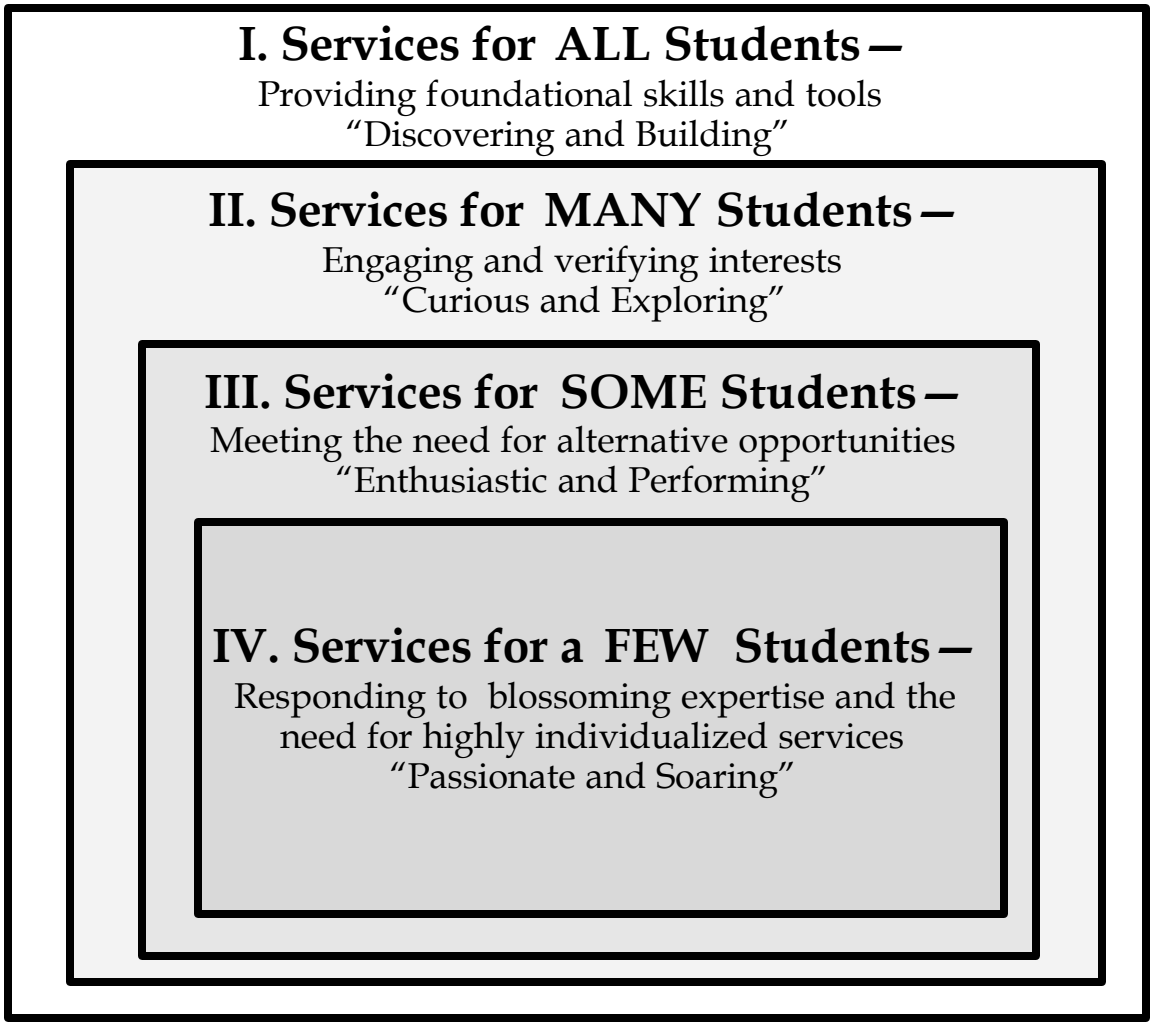

Figure 1: The Four Levels of Service

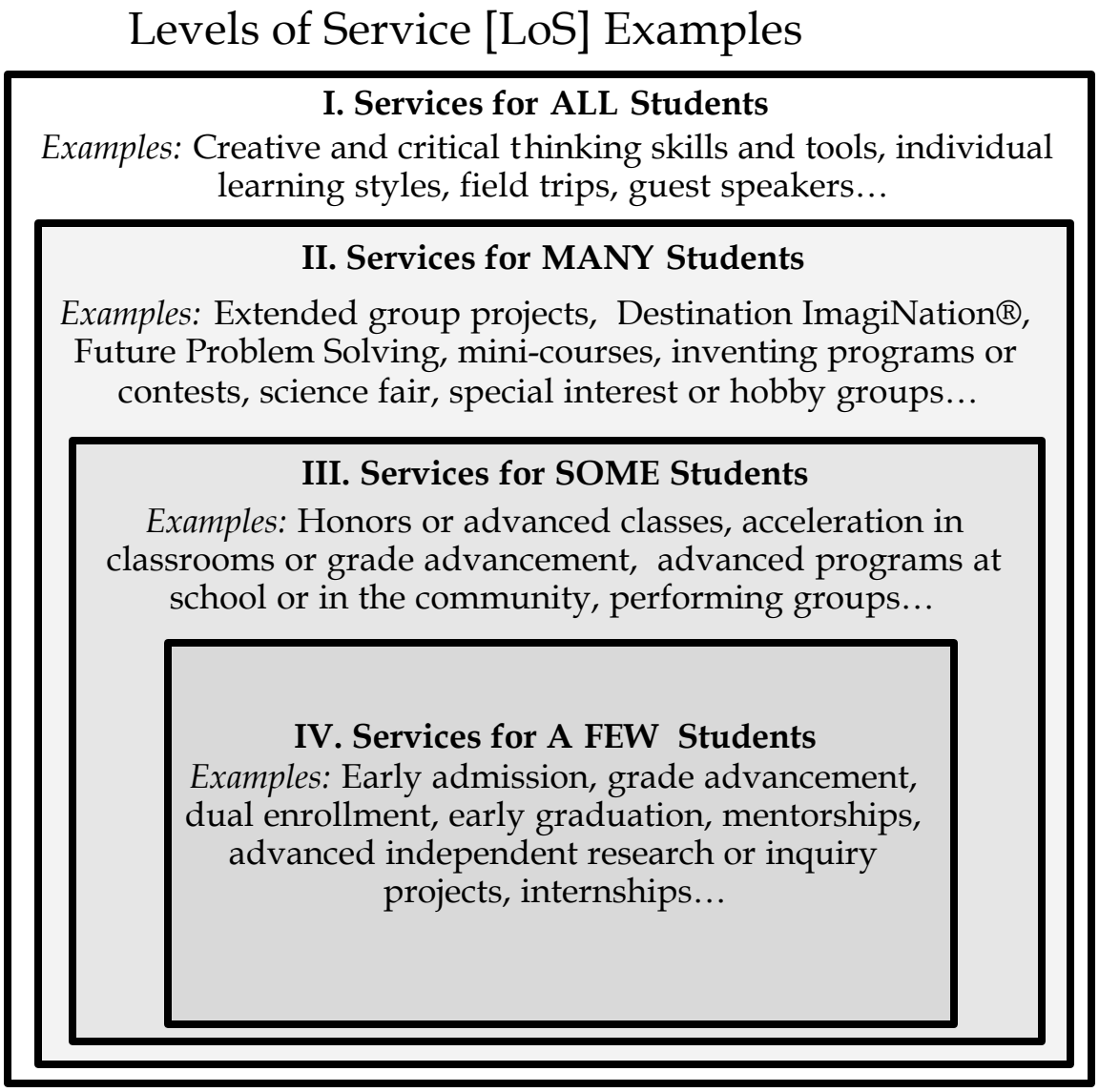

Figure 2: Examples of the Four Levels of Service