



# SENG Journal: Exploring the Psychology of Giftedness

---

Volume 1 | Issue 2

---

September 2022

## A Trailblazer in Innovative Residential Programming for Students with Gifts and Talents: An Interview with Colm O'Reilly

Colm O'Reilly

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, colm.oreilly@dcu.ie

Tracy L. Cross

William & Mary, tlcross@wm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/sengj>



Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), and the [Gifted Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation


O'Reilly, C., & Cross, T. L. (2022). A Trailblazer in Innovative Residential Programming for Students with Gifts and Talents: An Interview with Colm O'Reilly. *SENG Journal: Exploring the Psychology of Giftedness*, 1(2), 8-15. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.25774/Y9A2-YB38>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in SENG Journal: Exploring the Psychology of Giftedness by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).



## A Trailblazer in Innovative Residential Programming for Students with Gifts and Talents: An Interview with Colm O'Reilly

Colm O'Reilly, Ph.D.

Interviewed by Tracy L. Cross, Ph.D. 

Colm O'Reilly has been the Director of the Centre for Talented Youth-Ireland (CTYI-I) since 2004. In that time, the program has grown substantially, serving tens of thousands of students with gifts and talents across the country. His approach has been uniquely child-centered and his experiences have much to offer to those who wish to improve the lives of these students. In this interview, Dr. O'Reilly reflects on his years at CTYI-I and how he has built a highly effective and sustainable program.



Dr. Colm O'Reilly

**Cross** • *If you would, share with the readership what your first position was at CTY.*

**O'Reilly** • Sure. Originally, and I think that this is very helpful for my latter career, would've been that I went to college in Dublin City University (DCU) and I was just graduating from DCU at the time this program, Centre for Talented Youth, was

starting, and they were looking for residential assistants in the first year of the program. I had played a lot of sport in DCU, and that was like, I had kind of run soccer teams and we had played at quite competitive levels. We had upped the game relative to what was happening in DCU at that time. It seemed like a nice, fun summer job to do, even though I had no idea what it entailed or what was happening there. I hadn't even heard the centre had opened.

So I interviewed and I got this position as a residential assistant, and it was such a lovely fit relative to where I was in my life and what I was interested in doing. Here was this amazing program for bright kids to come on campus. But I think that definitely what shaped my whole vision for how I work in the field now is that the social side of it was so emphasized and so important, and that we were there to facilitate the social development of the students as a residential assistant.

I did that for a year and then I was promoted the following year to the senior residential assistant. In the meantime, I did some teacher training and I took a year to do that. I went over to UCD to do that, but I came back in the summer. In the middle of that year, an opportunity came up to do some postgraduate study to evaluate some of the work at the centre, which was obviously part of the funding that they got relative to it. So I applied for that,

and having worked on the program and had a positive experience, I subsequently had some teacher trainings, had some education background that I was successful in that application. I literally stayed with the centre from then on. I've worked in all, I think, the positions relative to the program prior to becoming the director of it in 2004.

On the summer program, I worked as academic coordinator, and also in various residential capacities over years, because I'd see students coming back and was very interested to see what they were like the year afterwards at a different level of their social development. That's always been important to me, and that would be why I've always focused on it a lot when I became director. Any time I'd ever give a talk or any time I ever talk to parents or to teachers or to students themselves, I emphasize that the academic and social development are equally important and that one has strong impact on the other, and that we're trying to create the situation that socially, students would feel comfortable here while they're on the program. And I think that's reflected in the evaluations at the end for their reasons for returning.

Particularly at secondary school, 99% would be, "Oh, it's social and my friends are here, and I like the social environment, and I like the space that's been created, where I can be myself with a bunch of people who are similar to me. I have lots in common with them, and I feel comfortable in that environment and making decisions for myself. And that's very different to what I would be used to either at home or at school." That's very positive, so I've always tried to recreate that each year with what we're doing. Also to recruit staff who I think have that vision and mission within them, and that's important to them—as opposed to just coming to get their CV updated. I think that's a positive thing, but we have to see the program have some social impacts, so that they can certainly act as role models for the next generation of students coming.

**Cross** • *Great. I want to take a step back just a minute. You have not yet even mentioned getting a Ph.D. in that period. If you don't mind, think about that period and describe it? When did you finish? How did that go? Did it inform your practice in any way?*

**O'Reilly** • Yeah. Obviously, when you work in a university, to me—look, I'm somebody who is driven relative to my job. I really like it, I'm a good advocate for it. But when you work in universities, most people have Ph.D.s. So in that context, I felt that it's important for my own personal development and also for external validation of your credibility to work in these programs. I really wanted to upskill. Since I work in the university, there would be opportunities to do that. And then obviously, I'd have access to students at CTYI. That made it easier again. I was able to do that while I was doing my job. That introduced me to the literature and to people who'd written in the field, and to what was happening generally in gifted education.

Obviously, it changed over the years, which is good that I subsequently did a Ph.D. because I was able to look at different literature, and there's a much higher level of detail required moving from masters to Ph.D. I got quite interested in people who were writing, like Borland (2003), about rethinking gifted education. And I know Tracy had a chapter, yourself, in that on qualitative research (Cross, 2003) and it was really interesting, mainly because, not that I hadn't heard of qualitative researching; I had, of course, but it actually really gave me a good insight into the questions we should be asking the students relative to their experiences on the program that we probably previously hadn't been doing. We were kind of scratching the surface on that, and that was interesting. I was interested in putting a philosophical critical lens on the field and stuff like that. It gave me a much better understanding.

I think it's really interesting, because it's a nice small field and people know each other, that subsequently, when I was attending conferences or working on projects or doing things, I was able to meet these people and see their vision enacted, and talk to them about their practices. That's really helpful and beneficial to my development. It humanizes it definitely, and then you can talk to them. I really am fascinated by people who are doing stuff that's similar to mine, and how they do it, and trying to see if I can learn from it, if we can replicate it or put it in a similar shape.

I think that around 2010 was a very significant time in that regard, because you spend a lot of time trying to establish a program, trying to make it sustainable, trying to make it workable, trying to get as many students as possible, and trying to make it so that it's self-sufficient so that you can concentrate on other things. Up to 2010 I was focusing on that. It's a lot of work and time driven into doing that, because you're starting from a base of a small number of students and the sustainability of it needs a large number of students. So we really had to get the message out there, and we promoted awareness and we did a lot to make sure we were increasing our numbers. But, probably because we're a small staff—bigger now, thankfully—we probably didn't have time

to do as much deep research or research projects to get involved in it.

It was actually in a European context, I was invited to something in Budapest in 2010, which was a celebration of Hungary as a European City of Culture. They wanted each country to talk about their practices in individual countries and areas. I'd presented at conferences before and I'd done stuff of a similar nature before, but it was only actually at this one that I realized we'd become quite a big program. We actually have quite a significant impact. Compared to what a lot of people were doing, we have stuff here that's going to be quite interesting if we could explore it further.

I was really surprised about that, but obviously, as I'm older, I'm more comfortable and confident in my career. So I'm going to have this as a priority in relation to what we're going to do next. Then, very fortuitously, Tracy himself contacted me around this time and said, "What's happening?" The timing of that was perfect, because it was just at the time that I really wanted to open a research agenda. It was really brilliant that you were contacting me, because you were somebody who I admired and was working in the field that I thought we really needed to explore in much more depth. These are the questions we're getting a lot from the parents, a lot more parents than teachers, because teachers are more thinking about curriculum, what's happening in the class. The parents are much more worried about the social-emotional development of their kids.

So this was wonderful, this idea to collaborate with experts in the field, as this was always something that I was very interested in. Obviously, it started on a smaller scale, relative to me using your expertise to come and talk to the parents as a person who has a lot of experience in the field and understands these issues, and has published and written on it. We got such positive and good feedback from it, I really was very interested to explore that further, as to what we collaborate and do together. I think that's been important to my understanding of issues, and also to how I would plan and progress what we're doing. To me, all this research has to have an impact on practice and what we do because that's very important for our sustainability, and for just my own feeling of improving what we're doing all the time in various capacities.

This was very helpful to give me a kind of a barometer to look at in developments of what we should be doing to look at these issues of social-emotional behavior within high-ability students as best we can. And it really took off from there. I got much more interested in what was happening at the National Association for Gifted Children NAGC and the current research trends, and what we could become leaders in, and push practice. Particularly in Europe, where there's very little research in that field. So I really wanted to establish that network and growth for two reasons. One, to obviously work in the university from a publication perspective, but more so for what that meant, and how we could improve what

we did internally in the program. That very much shaped the way I hired people subsequently, and the direction that I wanted the courses and classes to go in.

**Cross** • *That was very detailed and helpful to understand it. And as your colleague and friend, it's interesting to bear some of the confluence of events in your career.*

**O'Reilly** • I always think to myself I'm very, very fortunate in my career. A lot of good luck to have a career that I'm really passionate about and that I'm a huge advocate for, and that I can make a difference and have an influence on. Not many people can say they can do that in their job. And I thank the university relative to that because they very much allow me, they don't dictate stuff relative to what I'm going to do. They pretty much allow me to do what I want to do in that context. So that's really useful. But I have very high standards myself in that regard and I definitely think I have a duty and an obligation to these students to provide something that's better than what they would do in other places, and that is going to improve their life and is going to be good for them in the longer term.

I particularly think that's relevant to: One, students who are challenged or who have difficulties, because if you're very well socially adjusted and if you're getting straight A's all the time, you're going to get opportunities related to that... I'm not saying life is easy, but your pathway is easier and your structure is easier and things will probably work out whether you attended this program or not. It'll probably have a very positive impact on you if you do attend, you'll probably make loads of friends and it'll be nice for you, but I think it probably would've worked out. It's the ones who I think are vulnerable, who are challenged, who have difficulties: they need these courses to find their tribes, to find people who are like themselves. And to me, that's the biggest kind of challenge, but one that brings the best rewards. I'm not saying I only started thinking about this in 2010, I think about it all the time, but from 2010, I definitely felt I was more structured and equipped to deal with that.

It also heightened around the time that education in Ireland changed slightly. We were always kind of behind on inclusiveness relative to special needs. Look, that's a kind of a documented historical thing about Irish education. People taken out of classes and not in mainstream and stuff like that if they even were dyslexic. It's terrible kind of experiences, and not that long ago; in the '70s and stuff. So anyway, that was, thankfully, moved around and reshaped in the early '90s, but it was only around 2010, 2012, that I felt the benefit of that when we started getting a lot of reports, psychologists' reports of high-ability students with learning difficulties, mainly, initially at the time with dyslexia and dyspraxia, much more moving laterally to ASD and ADHD and stuff.

And now, I think an interesting thing, and this is something that I have direct experience of as I was reading these reports. Because I actually documented it myself. So these figures are...I'm thinking back to when I got the first one, but I have the actual figures. It's like, say, in 2000, I would've got 10 reports a year and now I get like 15 reports a week. That's not suddenly in the last 20 years, loads of gifted students have ASD or ADHD. It's that we're finally identifying them, and that the Department of Education in Ireland put a lot of money into the psychological testing service, and these services were provided. Now, some have long waiting lists and you're waiting a while. Then people at certain points maybe had more money so they invested in getting private reports done, but whatever happened, we suddenly now have a lot more of those students who have been assessed.

And to me, that's hugely significant because once we have the students, we can't just go and say, "Oh, well, we're just going to cater for them and not think about what the best practice is for them and how we should work with them effectively." That became really something that I was very interested in doing to make that the best experience for those students.

To me, the biggest trend and change in relation to work and high ability students is the number struggling and suffering with mental health issues. Now, that's always been in existence, we've always had students who've had challenges and problems and stuff. But I think now we're having so much more and now we're having so many more students who are coming to us and telling us that they are struggling. I think there's a positive about it in the context that people are more aware of their mental health and more aware of things that can go wrong, and less reluctant to say something. I think in a lot of environments, they were probably reluctant to disclose mental health difficulties or to appear vulnerable or to say they're not okay, but they feel comfortable doing it at CTYI.

Whereas we really started a policy in the last few years of really encouraging people to come to us if they felt they had any mental health difficulties, if they had any struggles, if they were having difficulty, be it on a longer-term challenge or in the short term on that particular day. And that's been hugely challenging, because there's a lot more than we expected, but beneficial because that's a great thing that people are coming and telling us and talking to us about it. So it's putting the structures in place to ensure that we can manage and handle that. That sometimes is difficult, but I'm very confident I have some brilliant people on my team who really invest in that and work very hard so we structure and put in place everything beforehand to try and facilitate that.

We do ask people beforehand to fill out medical forms to tell us if they're having difficulties or if they're seeing somebody during the year, because it helps us. It

doesn't make us want to exclude them in any way, it just helps us to facilitate it when they get there. The problem is that not all of them will disclose. I think up to 50% won't disclose. So what we want to do is tap into that 50% and hopefully get them to come out and come forward and tell us if they're having difficulties and problems, because that helps us to deal with things. But sometimes I do know that's challenging because it can be overwhelming when there's so many of them and we're not properly equipped to deal with everything.

But we're certainly trying to take them one person at a time in relation to that, and to keep people, parents, and anybody who is invested informed of what's happening on a very regular basis while the students are here on campus, rather than it feeling like it's a closed veil of mystery of what we do here. Definitely maybe sometimes with kids who are having a brilliant time and very well adjusted, everything's fine, we imagine they're communicating with their parents, telling them that's fine and that's okay. But if they come and say, "Oh, they haven't called us," we'll just say, "Oh, look, we'll get in touch with them and tell them to call you now."

The ones who have come to us with challenges and things, we are all the time ringing their parents, telling them, "They had a good day today, they went and this is what they did. They did this activity. They talked to three people today. They were very friendly. They were in class. They contributed." I think for their parents, that's such a relief to know that we're on top of that, that we're managing that. I'm not saying we're making a huge difference and we're changing everything, but we're trying to keep an eye on them, we're trying to keep them informed. And we're trying to take each day at a time, so hopefully things will get better. The parents just feel they don't ever get that feedback from school or they don't even get that feedback when their child has gone to a counselor or whatever.

We're really trying to bridge that gap, so that the parents are kept informed, and we do get some good results. That's one of the very good things. At the end that child usually has a great time, usually a positive experience. And the parents will really be very grateful relative to subsequently going, "Thank you so much for helping our child. It was so beyond the level of what we expected, the care and attention to detail that you gave individually to our son or our daughter in the situation. We really are grateful. It helped us to enjoy the time that she was helping our child, because we knew that they were being looked after."

And I think that's a minimum requirement, but I just sometimes despair in some of the other courses about how little people look at that or care about that or inform other people about it, even though they've an obligation to inform people, should these things come up. So I think that's a level of attention to detail, and I'm very fortunate that the staff that I have who work with me are incredibly invested in that too. They need to be, because they have

to follow up on it all the time and they have to do things and they have to communicate. But that is essential, and that makes summer programs very busy. Sometimes you just have to work very hard to make sure that's going to happen.

The difficulty, I suppose, is that more and more people are disclosing. As their numbers are increasing, though it's not that gifted students have significantly higher mental health difficulties than any other set of children. But they have the same, probably, maybe marginally less in some instances, but the percentage is still high. So once you have a lot of students, if your target is to get as many as possible to have positive mental health and to come to you with their difficulties, you're just going to have a lot of people coming to you with challenges that they're facing. And that makes your life very, very busy. This group takes up a lot of your time, but I think it's worthwhile because they're the group who are the vulnerable ones and the ones we really want to make a difference for.

**Cross** • *What do you think about when you hire your staff? You clearly hire a terrific staff, and I also know that you model for them things that you've talked about today. How do you prepare them to do what you have been describing?*

**O'Reilly** • I think that it probably starts with your full-time staff. I have like 10 full-time staff, which is quite a small number, and four or five of them are administrative staff. I try and, first of all, invest with administrative staff to give them responsibilities related to the program and to kids and to stuff that happens while it goes on, so that they don't feel as though their job is just being in the office all the time and not having interaction with students. The students coming on the program and positively benefiting from it and having a good time is in all our interests, relative to what our jobs are. And if you think of it, your job is just being part of putting new names in a database or photocopying forms or getting lists and schedules ready. Which is an important administrative role of the organization, don't get me wrong.

It's huge because that structure in place allows us to run things smoothly. But I really encourage them not to let that be their only responsibility, that they have some responsibility relative to students, be it at lunchtime, be it while they're coming in and registering them, be it while they're checking out when they're leaving, so they'll have some contact with the students every day so they'll feel more part of things. That's the first thing that I really changed when I started as director. Not that it wasn't in place, but you work in a university where sometimes there are clear demarcations between what an academic should do and what an administrative person should do.

Sometimes it gets less clear, because there's so much administrative work for all academic staff these days, but always what I want is for the team to be invested in what

we're doing in programs, and that they also see the benefit of what other members of the team do at certain points and situations and how the administrative structure is usually important for things to run smoothly. So we want the academic staff to respect that all these things are done for them and made ready for them from the administrative staff. But also we want the administrative staff to see that what the academic staff are doing is making a good difference on the kids relative to what they're doing and that the residential staff are doing an incredible job investing their time all the ways with these students and trying to make their lives better.

So I think it's important that we're always in it as a community and we recognize the essential needs of everybody. In relation to residential staff, I think the key thing is, that I am aware of who they are and what they do. Sometimes I see programs and I can't believe the way they do it. I just don't see how it could work. To me, the working of a good residential program is that I would have direct communication with the residential assistant who would be, say, a second year in college and they might be dealing with that student on a day-to-day basis, who we talk about, who may have a challenge or a problem. Then I see other programs, where that person reports to a senior person who reports to an assistant dean who reports the dean, and then the ninth person who hears about it is myself.

And that's a terrible way to run things or deal with things. To me, you have to have direct communication with the people who are making decisions relative to these students' lives. So therefore, maybe I'm fortunate that I've a smaller staff to do that, but it's essential that I'm in the loop from the first minute that any problem or difficulty arises. I can't understand how it's possible to run something without this type of communication. Like, my full-time residential coordinator is a full-time staff member here. She's also doing a Ph.D. in gifted education, so I really trust her and rely on her and she understands the issues, but she's somebody who directly works for me and then directly works with the kids and directly works with the staff who manage the kids. There shouldn't be too many differences in the chain of command in that regard.

I think that's a huge success, because we can talk to this person, the residential coordinator, and we can plan what we want for the course, and how we think it's going to work, and what we're looking for. And we can hire people; we interview together accordingly from the youngest, most inexperienced person who's doing a summer job. But that's an incredibly responsible role and a hugely significant one and really impacts on how the students enjoy the program, so we can't underestimate that role in any capacity. We have to have them trained up to deal with scenarios and situations as they occur. So, we have to understand what this person's motivations are and how we can work together for the benefit of the program.

We're very fortunate because it's now 2022, and as I said, this started in 1993. Seventy-five percent of our part-time staff are former students. Hugely good for the fact that they can empathize with why people come on the course, they can understand what their challenges might be, having experienced it themselves. And they also are good role models. So you're preaching to the converted relative to what they're doing and how they think. But obviously, we have to tell them to look out for things that can come up relative to this job. I think that the two things that are most important are that they understand that they're looking after kids, and that they're responsible *in loco parentis* to make sure the kids are safe at all times.

There can be a physical session at the start, so they know that they're in the room, they know they're in a place where they're being supervised, they know where their class is. But then, equally, it's a mental thing that they know they're in a mental safe space, they know that they are in an environment where they have to be very observant about who they're talking to, what they're talking about, and to what communication and message they're giving to them. So they have to be close to them and they have to understand that they need to tell us if there's a problem in that child's relationship in some capacity, be it with other students, be it with their parents, be it with themselves and their own mental health.

These are things that need to be communicated to us very quickly and very efficiently. And I do think that we have a number of ways of doing that. The students meet with the residential staff every day. Well, they see them all the time, but they have a direct meeting. There's a direct report post that meeting for our more senior staff. There's a meeting at nighttime after the kids are gone to bed, to see if there were any problems at that point—because we think the next morning's too late. We have morning meetings the next day anyway, but we want to, if there's been a problem at 10:30 at night, which is lights out, we would ring the parent at 10:45 rather than the next morning.

Why would we wait in that capacity? These are things that you just learn from experience, and from talking to people who care and are into it, and going, "Where have we ever had problems before? Oh, overnight? Why don't we just have a staff meeting at night?" Now, that makes it a very long day for them. We understand that. But we're assuring them that it's essential, because of what we're trying to do. We're not at the meeting like, "You can do it yourselves and contact us the next day." We're there. And then if there's something serious, we'll act on it immediately. And I think that's a minimum that you would need to do in running this type of program. It's great to have your senior staff be upskilled on challenges for what mental health problems these students might have, also then the growth of issues related to gender identity and non-binary students.

It's very important to have people who understand these issues. Good thing about a university, and we're a

liberal university and a leader and the people are very keen to represent minority groups in a favorable light, in this field, or areas like autism. It's not as conservative as you think, for Ireland. So universities are good spaces for that. But we want to be even ahead of the university relative to policies in this regard, so we're really going to try to do everything to be leaders in that sphere so that these students can feel safe in the environment that they're coming to, because feedback that we're getting is that they certainly don't feel that way outside of here. This has to be a space we can create for them that they feel comfortable and secure in. And that doesn't have to be just them buying into it. Every other student has to buy into it too and every other staff member.

And we're pretty strict about that. Obviously, people have different opinions, but we can't have people who don't respect where the students are coming from relative to their sexual or gender identity. There's a zero tolerance policy about that. I think everyone gets it, but sometimes people don't, because they haven't thought about it before. But I think you're a smart person, you're working here at a centre for talented youth, you shouldn't need to be reminded about that twice, about what people's pronouns are. You need to get on board with it. You can make a mistake, that's totally fine. I don't mind people making mistakes. People often do, and factors like inexperience, nervousness, all these contribute to people making mistakes. But when it's pointed out to you what the problem is, you should not make that mistake again.

The great thing about research on social and emotional and psychological profile is that this is not homogeneous at all; there's so many differences. It's really nice that we could create this environment where everybody's differences are applauded and actually given credence, and they're given time to articulate and talk about that without fear of anyone ridiculing them. So that, to me, is one of the great legacies of what we're doing. But I do think that I'd have to thank those students a lot for that, that we put a structure in place to facilitate that, but the students are incredibly dedicated to making sure that continues and is managed well. So I really applaud them for that. Maybe it's bright students in general. I think maybe they have difficulties in school and they respect the fact that we're trying to make that not happen here, but they're the real authority on that.

**Cross** • *I'm thinking in terms of sustainability of the program 20 years from now, 30 years from now. I've learned that you are a person of considerable charm and also very high standards, which sometimes is, I find, a difficult thing to pull off, to have both of those qualities. But in your case, you do, and I believe those are enormous assets in this role, given all the different groups of people you need to have a positive impact on, including from the president of the university to the most recent employee hired for the first job in CTY. They look at you and they listen to you, and they are affected by you.*

*During these years, I have seen you give your staff room to grow into their roles, and at the same time have continuity in treatment of your students, which is quite amazing in my opinion. What are your current insights or thinking about when the time comes for you to retire? What is it about you that is essential to being so successful in this job?*

**O'Reilly** • I definitely think that I wouldn't be worried about the future of the organization once I've retired or left the organization. I'm very happy. The team that I have at the moment are very invested and understand the problems and the challenges that the job faces. So I think that's it. The students love the program, and they're always going to want to come back. I say that a lot to the staff, the part-time staff and the younger staff: we're facilitators for what this program is. We all want to be liked, we all want to be popular, particularly as you're younger, you want to be the best RA or you want to be the best teaching assistant, or you want to be the best teacher.

One of the things I say every year, and I recognize that not everybody gets it at that time, but I think it's really worth mentioning, is that what we ultimately want as the best residential assistant or teaching assistant is to develop relationships between the students themselves. We want them to have positive relationships with us, we want them to see us as role models and as people who they can aspire to be in the future and of good standing and who understand them and get them, but the success and the sustainability of the course, is the friendships they make with each other. That's a more important legacy than the friendships and things they make with us. And sometimes that's much harder to understand when you're younger, because you're constantly looking for approval. But actually that's a huge success, if you can go and observe the students from a distance, and they're all chatting to each other and they're having a great time and they know they're safe because you're looking after them, but you don't have to be in the midst of them facilitating it all the time.

And okay, so some people require higher levels of initial intervention to get them to participate—but at a certain point, we have to let go and let them do that. That would be totally how I manage. I think of that in the way I manage all my stuff; at junior level and at senior level. You have to go and tell them, "This is my vision. This is what I think we could try and do." But sometimes you have to let them at it and do it and learn for themselves, and hope that you create an environment where they come to you for feedback and go, "How is this going? How do you feel this is working? How could we improve this?" I'm very fortunate with the staff that I have at the moment. The full-time staff are very good at that.

They're very good at driving forward their own ideas, and I think I give them space to do it. And then they come back to me and I'll give them feedback on how that's going and what's happening, so that's very good. Relative to that, I definitely think, as you get older, I actually got



better at my job because I feel more experienced, I'm more comfortable, even though sometimes when I was younger, I felt like, "I have so much to prove and I really want this program to be so successful." And I'm much more reflective on its success now. I actually do think about these things, about making the success not completely being dependent on me doing it. And that's why you give other people freedom to develop and do things.

But it is interesting in this kind of capacity and relation to the way I navigate relationships in the university. I definitely believe that this gets easier as you get older, because you recognize that some people who you are building a relationship with are at a certain age where they'll have kids who want to attend the program. They're probably going to be eligible to attend and they're interested in it. Therefore, they're a captured audience you can give your vision to. And if their kids are on it, they're miles more invested in it. The last two presidents of the university have had kids on the program. So that's a huge positive, and a side effect of what we're doing, that their kids are going to them, "Wow, this brilliant program, I'm having a great time." They're automatically going to think positively about it, in the same way as you have people that are younger age, I think, going, "I'm a Ph.D. student and I'm starting..." They're people who you recruit for jobs.

The people we get, by the nature of the job, it's fortunate isn't it? The top people are applying, the best Ph.D. students, the best researchers. Hopefully, they make great teachers. I'm not saying all the time they do, but they generally do. They're people who are going to be subsequently hired by the university because they're in demand as the best Ph.D. students, and because now they have this brilliant thing in their CV that they've taught for three weeks at CTYI. It's a great standout and they've experienced the teaching. So those people, you keep in contact with them and you keep relationships with them and you have positive experiences with them because they might be working then, and then you might need them for when they're taking on Ph.D. students themselves, to get your next level of recruitment.

We have programs like Early University Entrance where we need cooperating teachers to give their notes and lectures. Again, it's hugely helpful if they've had kids on the program, if they've been on the program, if they worked on the program previously. It's not like I'm a real networker, it's strategic. I just think these are common things: I'm a friendly, open, extroverted person. I've loads of friends. But I'm very impressed by younger people doing some brilliant things. So of course, I'm going to stay in contact with them. And of course, I'll remember them. And of course, I'll utilize that to further the agenda of what we're doing, but it shouldn't be that difficult because they're already invested in it. They've already had something positive relative to it. I'm very fortunate that a couple of my best friends who would be my own age are in very senior positions as professors in the university.

So they obviously help my agenda relative to CTYI. This program means a lot to the university. It's a different thing. It's huge. And I've been doing it for a while. It's generally, I think, very successful. Therefore, people have admiration relative to that. That's great. So then my own friends, I'll use their positions of influence to help me to get contacts with people who are outside the realm of people who I previously knew. And that would be just the way I always operate. I do it the same with people in other universities. I do it with people I know and with things like that, that I just have this network of people that I'm friendly with. And you just go back to them and ask them, "Oh, look, I'm thinking of doing this. Do you know anyone who might help," in the same way that they do for me.

I always try to help people if they have problems or difficulties. You can help more now because they probably have kids who they want to be on the course. They might have a child who they'd like to work on the course. It's not like you're doing favors, but it's just like, these are usually just find a fit for these people and they're totally suited anyway. So it's all fine. All these things are things that I just see as being collegial and friendly, and I don't find that difficult.

So to me, one of the most important things is that we need to keep a steady pipeline of getting students coming on the course. And that actually is quite an administrative duty and I will try to raise awareness so that will generate interest.

But we need to have a structure in place for assessments to make sure that we're getting enough in, and that's an administrative role. We have to have a system that can cope with 3,000 applications and staff who can do that and have it ready and have the assessment sent out to parents, so that they feel as though, "Well, these people know what they're doing," and they're ready to come the next summer. That, to me, is the first part of sustainability.

I have some staff who've worked with me for a number of years who are upskilling all the time, who are getting Ph.D. qualification, who I'm promoting in various positions. And I'm giving them more responsibility to talk to more senior people in the university who sometimes I would just talk to myself previously, so that they're more used to it. I know they're going to be impressed by them. "Wow, I met X the other day" or "I met Y. They're fab." And I'm like, "Yeah, I know. I work with them every day." I'm not surprised they say that. I wouldn't tell them to be meeting them if I didn't think that was going to happen. But that gives them a sense of empowerment and then the next time they're building that relationship, they don't need me. They might run by me and go, "I'm going to contact the head of sports, again, to talk about the sports scholarships."

I might facilitate the first meeting, but I don't need to micromanage and sit in on every meeting that they're simply going to have. I expect that their mutual admiration



and respect for what each other's work is and regard for their professionalism will sustain that relationship. And that's fine. I might check in every now and then, and I'd meet them in passing, but I don't feel as though I have to check up in relation to that. I only expect to deal with subsequent things that was like, "We're expanding this now to double it. What do you think?" or, "This is a slight problem with the continuity of that because somebody else has come in and wants to do it." And then I'm like, "Okay, we need to have a little conversation about how we're going to work through that."

But ultimately, empowering people to make decisions for themselves in that capacity and not being, oh, say, for example with yourself, Tracy, it's like, "Oh, Tracy is coming. He can only talk to me." You know what I mean? Because the nature is that Tracy's a professor, so he wouldn't be interested in talking to anyone else. But the sad thing is that some people actually think like that, other people in other organizations. I'm like, I know Tracy would be delighted to chat people on my team, particularly the ones who are interested in gifted education in areas that he knows about, but also even ones who are working in an administrative areas, because you're curious relative to what these people are doing.

And of course, I'm proud of the work they're doing. I think it's a good fit. And in fairness, I would say, at DCU, I do think that senior management in the university is quite good in the context of that if there's ever staff events or staffing, they're not coming just to talk to me. They might chat to me, but they'll talk to the rest of my team too. I'd encourage them to do that, but I don't think it's like I have to facilitate it and make that happen. I think they're interested in what the rest of my team are doing, I think they like chatting to them.

I always say to every staff member at every orientation, no matter whether it's the most junior or the most senior, or I think, is that what I ultimately, ideally want is when they make a decision in any capacity relative to the program, that it would be the same decision that I would make. I'm not saying because my decisions are always right, but it's something that if I subsequently have to stand over it, I can talk to a parent, I can talk to a professor, I can talk to a teacher, and I can say, "But what they did is exactly what I would've done in that situation. That's what we trained them to do, to deal with that situation. I felt they dealt with it very effectively. They dealt with it the way that I would've said." To me, that's a brilliant kind of a message to try and get across.

## References

- Borland, J. H. (2003). *Rethinking gifted education*. Teachers College Press.
- Cross, T. L. (2003). Rethinking gifted education: A phenomenological critique of the politics and assumptions of the empiric-analytic mode of inquiry. In J. H. Borland (Ed.), *Rethinking gifted education* (pp. 72-79). Teachers College Press.

**Dr. Colm O'Reilly Ph.D.** is the Director of the Irish Centre for Talented Youth (CTYI) at Dublin City University. CTYI provides fast-paced classes for academically talented students aged 6-16 years from all over Ireland and overseas. Colm has worked in the area of gifted and talented education for the last 20 years and has written articles and presented papers at numerous conferences around Europe and worldwide. His research interests include working with gifted students in out of school programs and their academic and social development. He is currently the secretary of the European Council for High Ability and the treasurer for the European Talent Support Network. He serves on the advisory board for the Center for Gifted Education at William & Mary and has just led a European Union project to design an online program for teachers of high ability students in regular classrooms.