Michael Pyryt grew up in Garfield, NJ, a working class town about 15 miles from New York City. Most people in his town were Polish or Italian. He is Polish on his father’s side and Irish and French/German on his mother’s side. He went to St. Stanislaus Kostka Elementary School (K–8). Most kids were Polish and Polish was taught as a graded subject. The school occupied the second and third floors of a building. The church was on the first floor and the Parish Hall was in the basement. There was one class of about 30 to 40 students per grade. They were taught by nuns. Pyryt said, “School was pretty easy; I was pretty conforming, so I wasn’t bothered by the lack of challenge. I was fortunate to be an altar boy in Grades 5–8. Besides getting to carry the incense, I missed a lot of class going to meetings, rehearsals, services, and house blessings.” He also loved watching sports and played midget league football.

Michael then attended Don Bosco Preparatory High School, an all-boys Catholic School. Although only a 20-minute automobile ride from where he lived, it was a 75-minute bus ride each morning and afternoon, as the bus trekked through Northern New Jersey picking up and dropping off students. Like most boys, he was encouraged to become a priest. Pyryt said, “I seriously thought about it between 12 and 16. Basically, I became disillusioned in high school.” He said, “The priests that I was exposed to were very dogmatic and focused on guilt rather than
growth. They all went to the same schools. The Diocesan priests went to the same seminary.”

Michael was good at school. “For the most part, academics came easily.” The school took a semihomogeneous grouping approach. “I was somewhat bothered by the rigidity and lack of challenge. Still, I played the school game and graduated 3rd out of a class of 170. I was on the football team one year, and I have the splints to prove it.”

Then he went to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore in 1971, majoring in psychology. He quickly experienced the difference between being a big fish in a little pond and a little fish in a big pond. “I loved Hopkins. It was very challenging and stimulating. I worked my butt off, as did everyone else.” The freshman class size was about 500 from all over the U.S. and several countries. “The majority of students were from the Middle Atlantic and Northeast states. It was clear from the beginning that past laurels meant nothing. Demographics were a non-issue. The challenge for everyone was to perform up to expectations. Everyone was capable of success and had high aspirations.”

While in college, Pyryt was an active member of Sigma Nu Fraternity. “It was a great living experience for 3 years. The Sigma Nu chapter at Hopkins accepted female members—which was quite radical in 1971. Our 4-story row house had 11 inhabitants—9 males, 2 females.” He was also active in the Catholic community on campus. “It provided an opportunity to share faith and fellowship with others.” One of the features of springtime in Baltimore is Hopkins lacrosse. “Part of the Hopkins’ experience is becoming passionate about lacrosse.” He attended every home lacrosse game and several games on the road each year.

When asked about the classes he took and their influence on him, Pyryt was kind. He said, “I learned something in every class. Sometimes I learned about areas that I wasn’t cut-out for. In the few literature courses I took, I generally got trashed for psychoanalyzing authors rather than using text-based literary criticism.” He says he liked psychology courses the best. Among his psychology professors was William Garvey, who taught a course called Social Psychology of Science. This seminar was
exclusively for psychology majors. At that time, Garvey was the chair of the psychology department. Garvey published several important papers on the communication process in science. He wrote about the importance of scientific conferences for networking and learning about the latest research.

Garvey’s class was important for several reasons. First, he talked about the career, lifestyle, expectations, and security of tenure of academic psychologists. “I went to Hopkins thinking I would go into clinical work and was exposed to the idea of being a ‘Psychology Professor.’” Second, the class ended up doing a group research project on attitudes toward science and technology. The class developed a survey and disseminated it to convenience samples of high schools and colleges. Then different class members analyzed different parts of the study.

Pyryt examined the relationship between religious orientation and attitudes toward science and technology. “I was given a print-out of chi-squares which revealed nothing. On further examination, I found some interesting differences in response style.” Jews and Protestants tended to be more skeptical (which is needed in science) while Catholics tended to agree with most statements. The paper that he wrote was well received and increased his confidence to pursue psychology and research.

His advisor for his first 2 years was Mary Ainsworth, world-renowned for her work in infant attachment. He took two courses with her. She was a strong believer in longitudinal research. Although Pyryt certainly conducts one-shot studies, all his grants asks for funding to do longitudinal work. “I also learned the importance of early attachment for subsequent development, a concept I keep in mind when trying to understand individuals.”

He also enjoyed his courses in social psychology with Clinton DeSoto. He did a few independent projects focusing on eye contact. He published a paper on gender differences in the perception of the meaning of eye contact in *Letters and Papers in the Social Sciences*, an undergraduate peer-reviewed journal at Hopkins. Finally, in the fall of his senior year, he took Julian Stanley’s Educational and Psychological Measurement. He was
exposed to tests such as the Raven’s Progressive Matrices, the Terman Concept Mastery Test, the Allport-Vernon-Lindzey Study of Values, and Holland’s Self-Directed Search. In the spring, he took Stanley’s course on The Gifted Child. “This was the start of my studies in gifted education.”

Stanley’s course got him started. He did well enough in the course to get recommended for a research assistantship with Lynn Fox, one of Julian’s Stanley’s former doctoral students and a cofounder of the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth. “Julian recommended the three seniors from the course.” Pyryt applied and got the assistantship, which also involved enrollment in the master’s program. Pyryt got a BA in psychology and stayed for an M.Ed. in gifted education.

“Clearly, the crystallizing experience was the Terman Symposium,” organized by Julian Stanley to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the first volume of the Genetic Studies of Genius. The symposium papers were published in the book The Gifted and the Creative: A 50-Year Perspective edited by Stanley, George, and Solano. “I came away from the symposium with a clear feeling that the field of gifted education was important.” Pyryt also felt that he could make a contribution to the field given his background in psychology.

“Lynn Fox was a wonderful mentor. I had a productive year as her research assistant. It was also great to be part of a team of graduate students that included Sandy Cohn, Linda Brody, and Dianne Tobin.” His work at Hopkins resulted in presentations at APA in 1975, and NAGC in 1976 and 1977, as well as publications in Talents and Gifts and Journal for the Education of the Gifted.

Then he went to the University of Kansas for his doctorate in educational psychology and research with a focus on the gifted. “I left Hopkins to pursue studies in creativity with Don Treffinger. I learned a lot about creativity, instructional planning, self-directed learning, and the academic lifestyle from Don.” At Kansas, an individual needed both a major and a minor area of study. Pyryt’s major was educational psychology and research with a focus on gifted, talented, and creative learners. His minor
was speech communications and human relations. His minor advisor was Paul Friedman in SCHRI. Treffinger left Kansas after Pyryt's first 2 years and was replaced by Reva Jenkins Friedman. Friedman had done her doctorate with Renzulli during the development of the original Enrichment Triad Model.

He had an interest in the question of social giftedness and whether it was distinct from intellectual giftedness. "There was a group of us—Paul, Don Treffinger, Bill Bowerman (Psychology), Woody Houseman, Jacque Huber, and myself who met periodically to discuss the construct." When Don left, Reva Jenkins joined the group. They made presentations at NAGC in Houston and Baltimore.

His dissertation was entitled, "Assessing Adolescent Interpersonal Communication Skills: Structural and Practical Dimensions." It started off as an examination of the construct of social intelligence. He was looking for the essence of social intelligence as defined by Thorndike in 1920, "the ability to understand others and to act wisely in human relations." It turned out to be two studies in one—a measurement study and a replication and application. He found that a list of interpersonal communication skills identified by Paul Friedman in 1978 at NAGC in Houston seemed to describe the domain of social intelligence. Pyryt developed a self-report measure of interpersonal communication skills, determined its factor structure, collected reliability and validity information, replicated the results, and examined differences by ability and gender with parental education as a covariate. SES was related to interpersonal communication skills. After controlling for SES, there were gender differences but no ability differences or interactions between gender and ability.

He still likes Thorndike's definition of social intelligence. "In analyzing the evolution of the concept, it seems that many researchers have focused on the first component, understanding others, rather than the second component, acting wisely in social situations. I believe that the essence of social intelligence lies in interaction." An article coauthored with another colleague appeared in Gifted Education International in 2002. When asked
to discuss the difference between social intelligence and academic intelligence, Pyryt said,

Basically, social intelligence is what Gardner would call interpersonal intelligence, skill in relating to others. I don't know how that it is possible without self-understanding or what Gardner calls “intrapersonal intelligence.” It's also similar to what Sternberg calls “practical intelligence” and what Coleman calls “emotional intelligence.” Only Sternberg gives credit to Thorndike. When I think of academic intelligence, I think of scores on individual IQ tests or group IQ/aptitude tests that assess verbal ability.

During his time at Kansas, Pyryt was a recipient of a Graduate Leadership Education Fellowship (GLEP) for 3 years. This USOE fellowship was administered by Abraham Tannenbaum and Harry Passow of Teachers College. Each summer, he participated in the Teachers College Summer Institute on the Gifted and met the gifted education faculty and GLEP fellows from the 7 GLEP universities (Teachers College, the University of Connecticut, the University of Virginia, the University of Georgia, the University of South Florida, Purdue University, and The University of Kansas). Pyryt said, “My time in Kansas was certainly enriched by my interactions with the other GLEP fellows—Jacquie Huber, Woody Houseman, and Madon Hawk.”

In addition to his courses in gifted education, Pyryt took every course in statistics and research that he could. The most influential course was Doug Glasnapp's multivariate statistics. “I instantly knew that quantitative studies in gifted education cried out for multivariate analysis, since they involved multiple independent and dependent variables.” Every analysis that he ever performed since then has involved some form of multivariate analysis.

He was also influenced by John Poggio's course in Program Evaluation, which helped him to clearly differentiate research and program evaluation. He was introduced to Provus’ Discrepancy
Evaluation Model, which he uses as a key ingredient in designing program evaluations.

Pyrty stayed at Kansas for 4 years, then left, prior to completing his dissertation, to take a job training teachers of the gifted at the West Virginia College of Graduate Studies in Institute, WV. Friedman facilitated the completion of his dissertation, serving as his supervisor. Treffinger was also on his dissertation committee, serving at a distance, from Buffalo. In West Virginia, gifted education is part of special education. Programs for the gifted and teacher certification in gifted are required by state mandate. Pyrty taught some of the courses that helped teachers get certified. “The best part of the teaching for me was the development and refinement of the courses. Some teachers liked what I had to offer. Others were less enthusiastic about the research and theory than I was.”

Pyrty’s first publication in the field was “Value Congruity Between Gifted Students and Their Parents.” It involved a comparison of Allport-Vernon-Lindzey value profiles between mathematically gifted students and their parents. The data were originally collected by Lynn Fox as part of her dissertation. It was the first of several studies dealing with affective characteristics such as learning styles and self-concept.

When asked, “If people were to begin to study the oeuvre of Pyrty and only had a few studies to focus on, which would they be?” Pyrty replied, “Hopefully, the next one. Basically, my studies tend to have several features. First, I tend to have an instrument development component, a historical component, and I apply multivariate techniques. I also like my article in JEG with Sal Mendaglio in 1994 on our approach to self-concept.” Those interested in learning style might examine “Is the Preferred Learning Style of the Gifted: A State or a Trait?” in the International Journal for Special Education. His reanalysis of the Terman’s data of As and C’s contains both the historical and multivariate component. It was in The Roeper Review in 1993.

Over the years, Michael collaborated extensively with Sal Mendaglio, a friend and colleague. Of Sal, Michael stated, “It’s been a delight to collaborate with Sal Mendaglio. I think we
make a productive team. Sal’s strengths are his understanding of psychological theory, particularly social development, and the insights gained from years of practice as a chartered psychologist. My strengths are in my knowledge of the gifted education literature, psychometrics, and multivariate analysis. Our skills complement each other, and we have developed a strategy for working together. Our collaboration tends to focus on self-concept, Dabrowski’s Theory of Positive Disintegration, or the interaction of Dabrowski and self-concept theory. We discuss a potential collaboration and decide who should take the lead on a particular project.”

Pyryt and Mendaglio have developed their own approach to self-concept assessment. It takes both a multidimensional and a multitheoretical approach to self-concept. The instruments that Pyryt uses are psychometrically sound, and they adequately reflect the complexity of the construct. Time and finances permitting, he is likely to include a popular well-known instrument and an experimental one in his research.

When asked about what he thinks are his most important research findings, he commented that whenever he reads blanket statements about the characteristics of the gifted, particularly affective characteristics, “I get queasy. My analysis of the literature, meta-analytic studies, and data-based studies suggest that things are far more complicated then they first appear. In many cases, what appear to be differences between gifted and average-ability students may simply be SES differences.” He also hopes that someday his adaptation of Sternberg’s theory to describe key ingredients for creative development will be a major contribution. “Right now, it is just another conception of giftedness.”

Editors’ Note

This issue’s “The Last Word” differs from our traditional format. On January 15, 2008, Michael Pyryt died unexpectedly from a blood clot resulting from a broken leg he had experienced a few weeks earlier. Jane Piirto interviewed Dr. Pyryt 5 years ago
for an American Education Research Association Research on Giftedness and Talent newsletter. Michael was a valued member of our Editorial Review Board, and we reprint Piirto’s interview as “The Last Word” in his honor.