

14-year-old is youngest ever to enroll in University of North Texas' Honors College

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DENTON – As far as University of North Texas administrators can recall, Lauren Coker is the only 14-year-old to ever enroll in the Honors College there.

But her older classmates don't intimidate the freshman, who says college has been good for her.

Lauren Coker, 14, is working toward a bachelor's degree in English at the University of North Texas, with a focus in creative writing.

"It's probably the best environment I've been in," Lauren said.

Professors are open to questions and opinions, she said, and she feels she's learning – and learning a lot – at a good pace.

Gloria Cox, dean of the Honors College, says Lauren holds herself with poise and confidence.

Ms. Cox met the Argyle girl when she gave a presentation in her freshman seminar, and the young student did not look out of place, she said.

"She had evidence of a great deal of intellectual talent," Ms. Cox said.

The Honors College has more than 1,000 students in its enriched-curriculum program, and Ms. Cox said Lauren met all the requirements for acceptance into the program.

Lauren is working toward a bachelor's degree in English with a focus in creative writing, but she is also being home-schooled in subjects including math, physical education and art so she can get a high school diploma.

If she were in high school, Lauren would be a 10th-grader. The last year she attended in a traditional school was ninth grade, after skipping eighth grade.

Lauren, whose IQ test places her in the "profoundly gifted" range, is a Davidson Young Scholar with the Davidson Institute, a national nonprofit organization that serves young, highly gifted individuals.

Her mother, Julie Coker, said two experts in the field of gifted education suggested about a year ago that Lauren go to college.

Ms. Coker waited for a year – while her daughter attended ninth grade – because she felt that Lauren was too young. But then they decided to give college a try, and the teen started out with 11 credit hours in the fall. Her mother said that was a breeze for Lauren.

This semester, she's taking 13 credit hours and loving it.

Lauren is "happier than she's been in years," Ms. Coker said.



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With Lauren's mental age being higher than many others her age, she sometimes didn't fit in and came off as awkward to those around her, as with other highly gifted children, Ms. Coker said.

Age usually isn't an issue for Lauren in her classes, and sometimes teachers don't even realize how young she is.

Last semester, Ms. Coker said, a professor asked students to write in Spanish about what they felt when they were 15.

A fellow student, who had gotten to know Lauren, raised his hand and asked, "What if you aren't 15 yet?"

Rachel Yeatts, who taught Lauren honors composition last semester, at first did not realize Lauren was younger until she was told.

"She's a bright, intuitive and enthusiastic student – always had interesting things to contribute to discussions and in her writing," Ms. Yeatts said.

Lauren's passion is writing, and she's been at it for years. She used to write plays for family and friends to put on. Lately, she's been focusing on short stories and has written a 400-page first draft for a fiction book that she hopes to get published this year. It's a spin-off of *The Phantom of the Opera*. Lauren describes her story "as to *Phantom* as [the production] *Wicked* would be to *The Wizard of Oz*."

UNT has long nurtured its bond with young minds at the Texas Academy of Mathematics and Science.

Four 13-year-olds and four 14-year-olds have studied at UNT through the academy for as long it has been associated with the university, around 20 years, UNT spokeswoman Kelley Reese said.

The university is also serving a 19-year-old student who started work on his doctorate when he was 17.

Young students accepted for enrollment at UNT come with the mental tools to handle the coursework, said Troy Johnson, associate vice president for enrollment management.

"They have clearly shown the academic ability" to learn at a college level, he said.