

**STEM, Autism, and Developing Professional Relationships: Interview with a Mentor,  
Part Three**

by Laura Gilmour, with Dr. Melike Schalomon

*Dr. Melike Schalomon is Interim Dean of Arts and Science and Associate Professor at [Grant MacEwan University](#) in Canada. Her background is in neuropsychology. In this three-part interview series, I speak with her about her experience mentoring me as an autistic student.*

*This segment explores how my case, and others like it, influenced Dr. Schalomon to advocate for administrative change in order to make Honor's degree programs at Grant MacEwan university accessible to autistic students and students with disabilities or health conditions. In fact, MacEwan is recognized within Alberta for initiatives to encourage diversity on campus and to support students and faculty of all minorities. I am thankful both for the advocacy of Dr. Schalomon and the values of the university when it comes to promoting diversity and inclusion.*

**Laura Gilmour:** This [topic of inclusion] is something that I am interested in. As I think it made a big difference for other students, as, for example, the policy that allows honor's students enrolled in a part-time course load to continue in the honor's program if they have a diagnosed disability.

**Dr. Melike Schalomon:** That was, actually, to me—that was a really big thing. I saw this as an inequity, and I thought it needed to be addressed, so I raised it at a number of places. I remember that you were one of the brightest students that I had worked with, but (you very well explained to me) that it just wasn't possible at that point in your life to carry a fulltime course load. And the rule that we had for needing a fulltime course load for being in the honor's program clearly discriminated against you as a student, who had particular needs—and there's lots of students with various needs—anxiety disorders and depression are extremely common in the student population. And what we were doing with this rule, really, was penalizing students who said, "I recognize my limitations." So, we have students coming in that are doing poorly in school, and we're requiring them to withdraw and saying, "You should have known better. You should have dropped some courses. You couldn't handle this many. You have to look after your psychological well-being." So, we're saying that, but, then, we're turning around and saying, "If you're dropping courses and you no longer have a full course load, then you can't be an honor's student." To me, honor's is about the *quality* of your work, the *quality* of your thinking. It's not about whether you can do this fulltime.

**Laura Gilmour:** I notice, even in grad school, they're flexible with the fact I sometimes take on less certain years, and some years I'm able to do more.

**Dr. Melike Schalomon:** I think that the thinking really has changed over the past twenty years that I have been teaching. We weren't as aware of it at one point, and when the rule was made, I don't think anyone considered how this might impact students who have various needs—health needs, physical, psychological health needs—that aren't able to maintain a full course load, but, intellectually, really are able to be in an honor's program. And who would really benefit from the opportunity. I brought this up, and in the end there was general consensus that that rule should have never been what it was. I must admit that, at

**STEM, Autism, and Developing Professional Relationships: Interview with a Mentor,  
Part Three**

by Laura Gilmour, with Dr. Melike Schalomon

an anonymous level, I used you and your case as an example in those discussions. I said, “I had this student, she was brilliant, she had problems with anxiety, couldn’t do the full course load, and as a result wasn’t an honor’s student, but she would have done wonderfully. I was basically forced with her to come up with a way of doing the equivalent of an honor’s project, just it wasn’t called ‘honor’s’.” And again, that is not fair. You did all the work, right? You should have been given credit for that work. At least it’s changed now. I wish it had changed earlier, but it’s changed now.

*[Part one](#) and [part two](#) of the interview available on [Stairway to STEM](#). [Part one](#) discusses mentoring autistic students in general, and [part two](#) discusses how teachers can effectively react when students begin to bring in personal information, such as health or mental health, into academic conversations. Transcripts available.*