

January 2005

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Recommended Citation

Croteau, Lael M. (2005) "Bridging into the Academy: Examining the Value of First-Year Transition Programs," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 26 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol26/iss1/7>

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Bridging into the Academy: Examining the Value of First-Year Transition Programs

Lael M. Croteau

Moving through student educational experiences involves making continuous and significant transitions. Despite practiced transition experiences throughout various stages of life, the transition into the academy leaves many students overwhelmed, confused, and lost. As students entering the academy grow increasingly diverse, it becomes necessary to address specific needs they will have as they bridge into college. The author questions how successful transitions are accomplished and seeks to recognize methods for creating orientation and transition programs to meet the diverse needs of rising first-year students.

Moving through student educational experiences involves making continuous and significant transitions. I remember as early as kindergarten making the transition from a part-time kindergartner to a full-time first grader. The school held a little graduation ceremony to celebrate our rising success as scholars. Our teacher gave us tips on what to expect of first grade and sent us on our way. In much the same tradition, I completed fifth grade and graduated into middle school. Before graduation, I received preparation and support from my fifth grade teachers about what the junior high school experience would entail. In eighth grade I experienced my next big transition into high school, receiving academic advising, counseling about scheduling courses appropriate for college preparation, and insight into the challenges that I might face entering the high school experience.

I believe that my experience is not dissimilar from many students progressing through the educational system in the United States of America. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman stated (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998) that first-year college students embark on their college journey facing many challenges. Some are real while many others are created through the anxiety and stress of entering into the unknown. My greatest fear entering college was that I would not know my community and that I would be lost in the sea of first-year students. I distinctly remember believing that going to a smaller school would provide me with the personal connections I needed to assist me in succeeding. I was told by my college advisor and peers that I would not receive the same support at a larger school as I would at a smaller school. Astin (1993), supporting this, stated, “in general large, less selective, public coeducational, commuting universities have a negative impact on freshman [sic] persistence, personal contacts with faculty, quality of instruction and opportunities to work with faculty” (p. 9).

Knowing my own needs as a first-generation college student with very little parental support, I chose to attend a smaller institution. What happens to students who choose to enter into larger institutions? What types of support do larger institutions provide? If I was to go back to that point in my life and decide to attend a larger institution, would I be unprepared--lacking the tools and support necessary for success? I am not sure what my exact experience would have been, but, regardless of size, in order to create successful first-year student transitions, Upcraft (1989) suggested that “institutions should have very deliberate goals for freshmen [sic]” (p. 5). Colleges and universities are philosophically bound to recognize the importance of facilitating intentional transition opportunities throughout the first year. “It is too important to be left to chance” (Upcraft, p. 5).

It is with this in mind that I will explore methods by which a successful orientation and transition program can be established. This article serves as a personal reflection on the enrollment process through the eyes of an admission counselor, and serves as a literature review examining trends in current publications. I will explore transition events that bring first-year students to the doors of the academy, discuss the enrollment process, and examine current support programs available for transitioning students.

From the literature, I offer a framework for communication and activities and analyze current trends in orientation and bridge programs. Missing in the literature is a comprehensive guide toward understanding how bridge programs and transition activities are evolving. Additionally, the literature lacks information about how bridge programs contribute to creating seamless living and learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of first-year students as they enter into the academy.

Transition Events

Admissions

Admissions recruitment can begin as early as the sophomore year of high school and continue up until May 1st of

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students' senior year in high school. During that time, admissions counselors develop direct marketing and recruitment strategies designed to help students create an initial connection with their particular college or university (Hossler & Bean, 1990). Admissions staff members skillfully make personal connections with students and work to create a foundation of understanding about the institution for prospective students. When I was working in admissions, we would hold our breath as we waited for May 1st to arrive. On this day, students would make their final decisions, and make a commitment to attend the institution. For me, this day was always an exciting day. As I looked through the list of students with enrolled student status, I knew that I would have the opportunity to assist them with the next step in their orientation to college. At this point, "the institution's relationship with them [admitted students] takes on a new tone" (Austin, 2003, p. 143). Students begin to develop a more emotional connection with the college by initiating the experience of learning the traits, traditions, and language of the institution (Austin, 2003).

I was always aware that during the transition process students faced a range of experiences. For first-year students, significant adjustment and development are expected. "Both traditional and nontraditional freshmen [*sic*] have to start all over again, and face the stresses of a new and more demanding environment" (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 69). As such, universities have a responsibility to create opportunities for students to move from peripheral members of the community, who face new concepts, people, and systems that may be unfamiliar and confusing, to engaged, connected, insiders (Levitz & Noel, 1989).

To aid in their transition to insider status, students need to make connections with older students, staff, and faculty (Levitz & Noel, 1989). These connections are referred to as interventions by Upcraft (1989) and include "orientation, developmental advising, academic assistance, mentoring, counseling, residence hall programs, campus activities, and wellness programs" (p. 11).

Orientation

Perigo and Upcraft (1989) defined orientation to a college or university as "any effort to help freshmen [*sic*] make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and enhance their success" (p. 82). Strong orientation programs meet several needs for a college or university. On a primary and essentially philosophical level, orientation and transition programs may be seen as an "obligation to help first-year students maximize their chances of succeeding in college" (Perigo & Upcraft, p. 83).

Upcraft (1984) suggested that first year success is determined by the progress made "toward fulfilling their [students'] educational and personal goals" (p. 2). First-year students do this in various ways. Upcraft suggested that success can be achieved when a balance between personal and intellectual development is reached. When both the social and the academic development of the student is nurtured during the transition process, then dependent learners move toward more autonomy and independence in their learning (Levitz & Noel, 1989). These suggestions may also sound strikingly similar to Chickering's identity vectors: (1) developing competence, (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature interpersonal relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity (Chickering, 1969).

Terenzini et al. (as cited in Kezar, 2000) suggested that students face more significant barriers to success during their transition into their first year of college unless the right components are in place. Barriers may apply when students lack self-confidence, have unreasonable and unformed expectations about the college environment, have underdeveloped connections to the college community or external community, do not receive validation early on during their transition within the college environment, have family members who do not understand the goals of college, and have not interacted with faculty. These factors illustrate the importance of opportunities provided by institutions for making connections and receiving validation as early as possible during the orientation process.

Timing

Successful orientation programs "must be appropriately timed and sequenced from the pre-enrollment period, through the entering period, to the post-entering period" (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989, p. 84). Chickering (1969) found that institutions with clear transition programs and institutional objectives can accelerate each of the identity vectors; conversely, poorly designed programs may hinder students' identity development. Orientation planners risk overwhelming students with information when trying to provide them with too many of the tools they will need for success all at once (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989).

Who is Enrolling in Colleges and Universities, and Why Does it Matter?

In the year 2004, approximately 13,736,000 undergraduate students will be enrolled in colleges and universities throughout the United States of America (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Undergraduate students will attend full-time and part-time and be diverse in “age, race, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, ability and other characteristics” (Upcraft, 2003, p. iii). When considering models for orientation, transition, first-year seminars, and other enrollment programs, attention to the demographics of enrolled undergraduates will significantly assist professionals in guiding students appropriately.

In the book *The Millennials Come to Campus*, Lowery (2001) interviewed researcher William Strauss, who, with colleague Neil Howe, examined the impacts of the Millennial generation of college students on higher education. Millennials are defined as high school graduates after 1999. “They’re the most numerous, affluent, and ethnically diverse generation in American history” (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Howe and Strauss (2000) determined that the face of enrollment is changing. As students from more diverse backgrounds enter into the academy, they bring with them increased expectations and need for more personalized transition experiences. These students take college extremely serious, involving their parents and working to get the most for their money (Lowery, 2001). The Millennials represent approximately 62% of the currently enrolled student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Given the more diverse background of the Millennial students as well as their increasing majority presence on campuses, their impact on the services provided by institutions is significant.

Institutions are just beginning to experience the Millennial generation. It is prudent for colleges and universities to consider the changing qualities of this generation as they assess current programs and services, particularly related to the first-year transition. Institutions will experience increased student retention and persistence by paying attention to the changing demographics of incoming first-year classes through flexibility and a willingness to meet developmental and transitional needs (Mortenson, 2003).

The Seamless Experience

“Systematic methods of increasing each freshman’s [sic] level of comfort with the academic and living environment” (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 72) are essential in creating a seamless experience. Success in orientation programs occurs when members of the campus community participate actively and collaboratively in transitioning students to campus.

Entering students will experience a better transition when administrators, students, and community members operate in a “sustained coordinated effort” (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 71) and work collaboratively to provide programming and services for incoming first-year students. This could take shape through a variety of ways: a programming series, information fairs, faculty advising, residence hall advising, participation in orientation events, or working collaboratively with the offices of admissions and orientation to be involved with recruitment and transition programs.

Faculty participation is vital to the success of these transition experiences, and faculty must be represented throughout the process. Sadly, “about 40 percent of the undergraduate respondents to the Carnegie Foundations survey (Carnegie Foundation of the Advancement of Teaching, 1986) said no professor at their institution took a special personal interest in their academic progress” (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 71).

Universities may want to use The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s (UIUC) strategic thinking process about the first-year experience as a model for creating a seamless transitional experience. UIUC specifically addressed the developmental, intellectual, cultural, and social needs of first-year students by posting the accomplishments of twelve on-campus student service offices on the University’s Web site. The level of accountability UIUC holds its student service offices to is a key piece of this plan and the subsequent success of its programs. Each of these student service offices provides a critical link to orientation and the first-year experience (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2003).

Serving the Needs of Diverse Populations of Students

Kezar (2000) wrote, “Over the past thirty years, access to higher education has expanded markedly. As in most historical times of expansion, remediation and support programs grow to help new populations make the transition to college” (p. 1). Support programs create a bridge into the academy for students and “will continue to be important as higher

education continues to expand, increasing access to more and different populations” (Kezar, p. 4). Intentional programmatic support structures serve as a tool to address changing student needs.

Current bridge programs address the transition needs of low-income, minority, first-generation, or other students that may be deemed disadvantaged. The programs are designed to improve the chances of retention for underrepresented populations of students entering higher education. They provide strong social support networks, mentoring, community development, and opportunities for the development of self-confidence (Kezar, 2000). Santa-Rita and Bacote (as cited in Kezar, 2000) stated that “studies expanding retention and grade point average indicate that students in support programs tend to perform better (GPA) than students who did not receive the same type of support” (p. 4). Specific programs that help to facilitate this transition and support include: academic support in the areas of writing, reading, math, and study skills; conveying goals of a liberal arts education and discussions about college life; career counseling; relationship development; computer literacy; community development (service and internships); and personal reflection (Kezar). Additionally, support programs may include pre-orientation weeks or weekends and specifically address areas of interest for individuals entering the institution. For example, students may select to attend a week-long pre-orientation trip that focuses on community service, a three-day hike through the mountains, or a kayaking trip with an outdoor club. These programs provide students with opportunities for creating successful transitions. The challenge with pre-orientation weeks or weekends is that they are costly, posing potential barriers to particular populations that may need them the most, such as first-generation, minority, or non-traditional first-year students (Kezar). Regardless, institutions choosing to invest in these types of support programs will make steps toward addressing the needs of transitioning first-year students, while fulfilling strategic goals.

Enhancing Persistence

What else can institutions do to enhance persistence and avoid variables that deter success? Through the course of my research and my professional experiences, I have found several suggestions for ways institutions can work to achieve higher rates of retention and persistence.

Technology.

Technology will become more of a factor in attracting and acquainting students with colleges and universities. “Once on campus, students will continue the transition to college by taking a mixture of virtual and traditional classes, including first-year seminars; communicating electronically with faculty; researching, submitting, and receiving feedback, etc.,” (Upcraft, 2003, p. iii.). For example, Saint Michael’s College in Colchester, Vermont, utilizes an online message board to introduce and familiarize students to the college prior to arrival. Once admitted, students communicate with each other as a class or ask admissions counselors questions about the enrollment process. There is a forum for parents and orientation information is posted. This online method assists students in developing a sense of community prior to orientation. They are able to communicate with each other and current students, staff, and faculty on campus, sharing ideas, exchanging concerns, and developing connections. Larger universities may face a more daunting challenge and can rely more heavily on technology to create an easily accessible, online university community (Upcraft).

Faculty advisors.

Institutions might consider offering early opportunities for interactions with faculty from various departments via an online message center or by connecting students with faculty advisors during academic orientation and pre-orientation weekends (Upcraft, 1989).

First-year seminars.

First-year seminars that prepare students to meet academic standards can be offered before or simultaneously with more academically challenging courses. In some cases, institutions may design additional stepping-stone courses to further aid students. First-year students take these fully credited, elective courses to prepare to take more challenging courses in the future (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft, 2003; Upcraft, 1989).

Demographic information.

Orientation personnel can request information about the incoming class from the campus admissions office and plan directed programming based on the demographics and interests of the student population (Upcraft, 1989).

“When freshmen [*sic*] learn and grow, when they are encouraged to discover and develop their talents in preparation for the future, re-enrollment is the result” (Levitz & Noel, 1989, p. 71). As colleges and universities map out their strategic plans pertaining to the first-year experience, transition, and orientation programs, it is essential for them to pay close attention to changing trends. Students enrolling in institutions today have been prepped, prodded, recruited, and sold on the idea of the college experience. Regardless of how prepared students seem, they are more diverse than ever before. As a result, institutions will need to think creatively about new ways to help students transition.

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