Maximizing First-Year Student Learning and Success in College: The Paradox of Transitions

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Today’s First-Year students…

- Traditional-aged first-year students were born in 1992
- The Millennial Generation (born between 1982-2001)
  - Central characteristics and tendencies:
    - Special
    - Sheltered
    - Confident
    - Conventional
    - Team-oriented
    - Diverse
    - Pressured
    - Achievement-oriented

Today’s First-Year students...

- Traditional-aged first-year students were born in 1992
- The Millennial Generation (born between 1982-2001)
- Very few, if any, have written (or know how to write) in cursive.
- Cell phones have always existed and been small.
- Email is just too slow and they rarely, if ever, use US postal (snail) mail.
- Korean cars have always been a staple on American highways.
- Fergie is a pop singer, not a princess.
- They have never twisted the coiled handset wire aimlessly around their wrists while chatting on the phone.
- Computers have never lacked a CD-ROM disk drive (and few, if any, ever lacked a digital camera).
- They’ve never recognized that pointing to their wrists was a request for the time of day (since most use their cell phones, not watches, for time).
- Czechoslovakia has never existed.
- Toothpaste tubes have always stood up on their caps.
- “Barney” is a purple dinosaur; they know nothing of Barney Fife.
Today’s First-Year students…

- Having hundreds of cable channels is their lot in life, yet having nothing to watch has always been routine for them.
- The U.S., Canada, and Mexico have always agreed to trade freely.
- They first met Michelangelo when he was just a computer virus.
- Starbucks has always been there…hasn’t it?

Information taken from Beloit College “Mindset List” for Class of 2014.
Today’s First-Year students…

- Not all first-year students are traditional-aged.
- 60% of US college students are over 25
- Their lived realities, then, include:
  - Family responsibilities
  - Work schedules
  - Competing demands (and priorities)
  - Financial pressures
  - Oftentimes, commuting to campus
  - Serious “choices” due to work-life-school imbalance(s)
Impact on higher education...

- These trends and general characteristics can have a significance influence on higher education in a number of ways:
  - Expectations of technology and the speed of communication
  - Expectations about entertainment and use of one’s “free” time
  - Residence life
  - Pressure(d) for high grades
  - Sense of entitlement
  - Expectations about the nature of college
  - Motivation is driven largely by personal benefit, gain, and significance
  - Multi-tasking is a way of life
American higher education long enjoyed public support and confidence in the “system’s” ability to produce educated individuals; education was viewed as public good.

Mounting concerns over the quality of American higher education, particularly given student success rates (i.e., retention, attainment) and other trends:
- Consistent national survey data suggested that students were fairly un-engaged during college.
- Specifically, first-year students were not always challenged to work to their full potential; college seemed much less challenging than they expected.
- Consequently, students spent much less time studying than faculty expected.
- The weight of empirical evidence suggests that student success is largely determined by student experiences during the first year.
As a result, there has been extensive attention given to the first-year experience:
- Increased campus-wide, national, and international conversation and action about the first year of college (e.g., 1st year retention specialists).
- The introduction and revision of initiatives designed to help first-year students succeed.
- The expansion of research and scholarship on the first year of college.
- The development of closer collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs.
- The emergence of credible assessment studies to demonstrate the efficacy of initiatives to help first-year students succeed.
- The integration of technology into first-year initiatives.
- The inclusion of diversity in first-year initiatives.
- The classroom has become more central to efforts to promote first-year student success.
Focusing on the First Year...

- Despite these improvements, many challenges remain:
  - There is no consensus about a clear sense of purpose in the first year.
  - First-year student academic success rates are still too low.
    - Institutions, like our own, have been effective in reducing first-year attrition rates but continue to wrestle with persistent high rates of attrition (beyond the first year) and relatively low graduation rates
  - Some still believe student recent (or success) is a “student problem”
  - College, on average, is far less challenging than first-year students expect.
    - National surveys still report relatively high levels of academic disengagement, boredom, absenteeism, and cheating
Focusing on the First Year...

- Despite these improvements, many challenges remain:
  - Establishing first-year initiatives that respond to the needs of today’s increasingly diverse students is a major challenge.
  - Efforts to help first-year students are too often focused on retention rather than student learning and graduation.
First-year student success measures...

- Successful completion of courses taken in the first year
- Continuing enrollment into the second year (i.e., retention)
- Learning
  - Developing intellectual and academic competence
  - Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
  - Exploring identity development
  - Deciding on a career
  - Maintaining health and wellness
  - Considering faith and the spiritual dimensions of life
  - Development multicultural awareness
  - Developing civic responsibility
- Learning is often the consequence or “outcome” when a *proper balance of challenge and support is maintained*...first year “transitions” provide the challenge, we provide the support (in part).
Transition theory...

- A transition is an event or non-event that results in change.
- A transition is characterized by a change in roles, relationships, and/or routines.
- Schlossberg (1997) explains the transition process as “moving in, moving through, and moving out.”
- An event is something that happens; while a non-event is something that one expected and/or wanted to happen but it did not.
  - Four S’s determine the severity/impact of a transition:
    - Situation: timing, impact, and amount of control
    - Self: coping skills, experience, outlook
    - Supports & Strategies: people, agencies, finances
      - Major groups: personal relationships, professional relationships, organizational affiliations
- The paradox, in my opinion, is that transitions can lead to growth and development or regression, developmental decline, or withdrawal.
Transition theory...

The Individual Transition

Potential Resources - 4S's assets / liabilities

Approaching Transitions
- type
- impact
- context

Changed
- behaviour
- role
- learning
- perceptions

The Transition Process changing reactions over time

Adapted from: Schlossberg (1995)
First-year student experiences...

- **Meet Derrick**
  - 18-year old, 6’ 3” Black male, identifies as African –American and Haitian
  - Grew up in an urban environment in Cleveland, OH
  - Graduated in top 10% of his high school class
  - Intends to major in sociology at OSU
  - Decides not to pledge a Black fraternity

- **Meet Jennifer (whose friends call her “Jen”)**
  - 26 year old first-year student lives in Columbus (near Easton)
  - Mother of two children (one boy, one girl)
  - Works full-time for Limited, yet majoring in elementary education at OSU

- **Meet Ashley**
  - 18-year old Asian male living in the residence halls
  - Knows that he’s gay but lives “in the closet,” so he says
  - University scholar
Transition theory...

The Individual Transition

Approaching Transitions
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Potential Resources - 4S's assets / liabilities

situation → support
self
strategies

The Transition Process changing reactions over time

Adapted from: Schlossberg (1995)
Promising practices for first-year students...

- New student orientation (e.g., OSU orientation)
  - As well as other “welcoming“ ceremonies (e.g., Convocation)
- Summer bridge programs
- First-year “reading“ programs (e.g., Buckeye book community)
- First-year seminars and first-year study skills courses (e.g., Success series)
- Learning communities (especially formal living-learning communities)
- Service-learning initiatives
- Parent programs, initiatives, newsletters (electronic of course)
- Personal “holistic“ academic advising or counseling
- Supplemental instruction
Major recommendations and questions...

Recommendations

- Build on success with first-year retention rates to focus on student learning and development as well.
- Devote needed attention to student graduation rates, not just retention.
- Establish new or revise existing policies, programs, and services to address needs of diverse learners, especially those who live at the intersections of identities.

Questions

- How do we organize the college experience, especially for first-year students?
- What collegiate experiences contribute to or detract from first-year students’ transition to college and persistence to graduation?
THE END

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