

Forging Connections: An Investigation of New Students' Perspectives of Their Transition to the University

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We studied first-year students through an integrated group workshop and longitudinal interviews that focused on students' transitional experience at the university as well as the strategies they developed to adjust to university life. Four themes emerged: the challenges of forming connections to other students with similar interests during the first few weeks on campus, the need to balance competing demands, varied experiences of connection with faculty and staff, and the need for translation of university life for minority students. To address the issues and concerns that emerged from our findings, we offer a number of advisory recommendations and programmatic initiatives.

KEY WORDS: first-year students, faculty members, hermeneutical research, minority students, student life

Relative Emphasis: research, practice, theory

Problem Statement

Research in the student development field (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007; Tinto, 1993) has repeatedly indicated that increased student engagement is linked to improved retention. Kuh et al. (2007) found that the best predictor of student satisfaction with college is the degree to which students perceive the college environment to be supportive of their academic and social needs. As a result of these findings about connectedness in college and student satisfaction, we wanted to understand more fully the experience of first-year students, and we wanted to base our understanding on their accounts of that transitional year. Our intention is to share findings with staff and faculty as they develop programs to promote both student engagement and successful coping with academic and interpersonal demands. While the findings on students' perspectives are particular to our university setting, the integrated workshop and interview approach to understanding students' stories may be replicated to other institutions of higher education.

To learn more about student experiences, we offered a workshop series, Forging Connections; it was designed to help both undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty members and staff with coping skills associated with transition experiences. As part of a related qualitative research project, reported herein, the student and staff workshop participants were interviewed both before and after the workshop to share about their feelings of connectedness to the college. Results yield longitudinal data regarding first-year transition experiences.

Literature Review

While few personal accounts of first-year students' transitional experience to the university are available, student perceptions of their freshman orientation week (FOW) were captured by Ericson 1998, and their first semester experiences were studied by Thompson, Orr, Thompson, & Grover 2007. Kuh (1993) used a mixed methods study of seniors' perceptions of learning outside of the university classroom, and Anthony (2000) used a questionnaire-based study in which lecturers' and students' responses were compared as a means to focus on factors influencing first-year students' success in mathematics. Kuh (1993, p. 278) noted that research methods used to assess college experiences have generally been positivistic and limitations have been introduced because "researchers determine both the questions to be asked and the response categories."

Using a content analysis of the formal assessments of FOW, Ericson (1998, p. 11) found that "students were of the opinion that the time spent on affective and social problems in the FOW helped them considerably to be successful and cope during the fall semester." This study drew on a relatively small sample of at-risk students.

Thompson et al. (2007, p. 643) found that four factors appeared to influence first-semester students' success (from their perspective) including "time management/goal setting, academic advising, stress, and institutional fit/integration." In a discussion of implications, the authors noted that "without gaining an understanding of student perspectives the university is unable to structure mean-

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ingful practices aimed at improving the student experience" (Thompson et al., p. 646).

Anthony (2000, p. 12) concluded her study with the observation that "students placed greater emphasis than lecturers on those factors related to lectures and course design." She suggested that consideration of these discrepancies "provides a starting point for bringing together the voices of students and lecturers" (p. 12).

Methods

A Hermeneutical Model of Qualitative Research

We used a hermeneutical model of qualitative research, as articulated by Kvale (1994, 1995, 1997) with regard to a collaborative-action research design. In this approach, the data, are rooted in the process of translation between the interviewer's and interviewee's worlds.

Hermeneutical investigation is based on an assumption that a tradition (cultural context) informs the investigator's interpretation (Schwandt, 2000). The researcher must be willing to question his or her context of understanding in the back-and-forth conversations about meaning.

The fact that we belong to a tradition and that tradition, in some senses, governs interpretation does not mean that we merely reenact the biases of tradition in our interpretation....The interpreter risks those (preconceptions or) prejudices in the encounter with what is to be interpreted (Schwandt, p. 302).

The interviewer tries to expand her or his predispositions from their tradition and context. As he or she begins to understand, or translate, the interviewee's meanings, the interviewer questions the emergent analysis with the interviewee. In this way, the interviewee may refine and comment on the interviewer's developing understanding.

The hermeneutical approach is closely related to a collaborative constructivist model (Stewart, 1998) in that one can only understand informant's meanings by understanding the context and worldview in which these meanings are embedded; however, hermeneutical interpretation is less relativistic than postmodern constructivist models (Geertz, 2000; Schwandt, 2000). While one cannot build a completely accurate understanding of participants' meanings from an hermeneutical perspective, the interviewer can get closer to the truth of a translated meaning as she or he opens the inquiry so that assumptions are put at risk and understanding is less constrained by the dominant views expressed in the interviewer's tradition (Gadamer, 1984).

During the initial analysis of the interview data, general categories often appear salient and inter-relationships among categories are identified using a process that has been called "axial coding" (Strauss, 1996), which is a method also described as "mapping." At this stage, researchers gain a general sense of relatedness and proximity between and among categories. Out of this process, core or supra-ordinate categories emerge that appear to illustrate significant relationships within each category. For each supra-ordinate category, the data are reexamined for subcategories. The aptness of supra-ordinate categories as well as the structure and context of subcategories are tested with further dialogue with interviewees.

Workshops

The purpose of the workshops was threefold. First, it was to inform psychoeducational groups focused on coping and communication skills, as informed by recent literature (Braxton et al., 2004), on the usefulness of preventively oriented groups for entering students. Second, the workshops served as volunteer pools of first- and second-year undergraduates for the longitudinal interviews. Third, we wanted to pilot a group that involved participants (and therefore potential connections) across university populations including undergraduates, staff, graduate students, and faculty members.

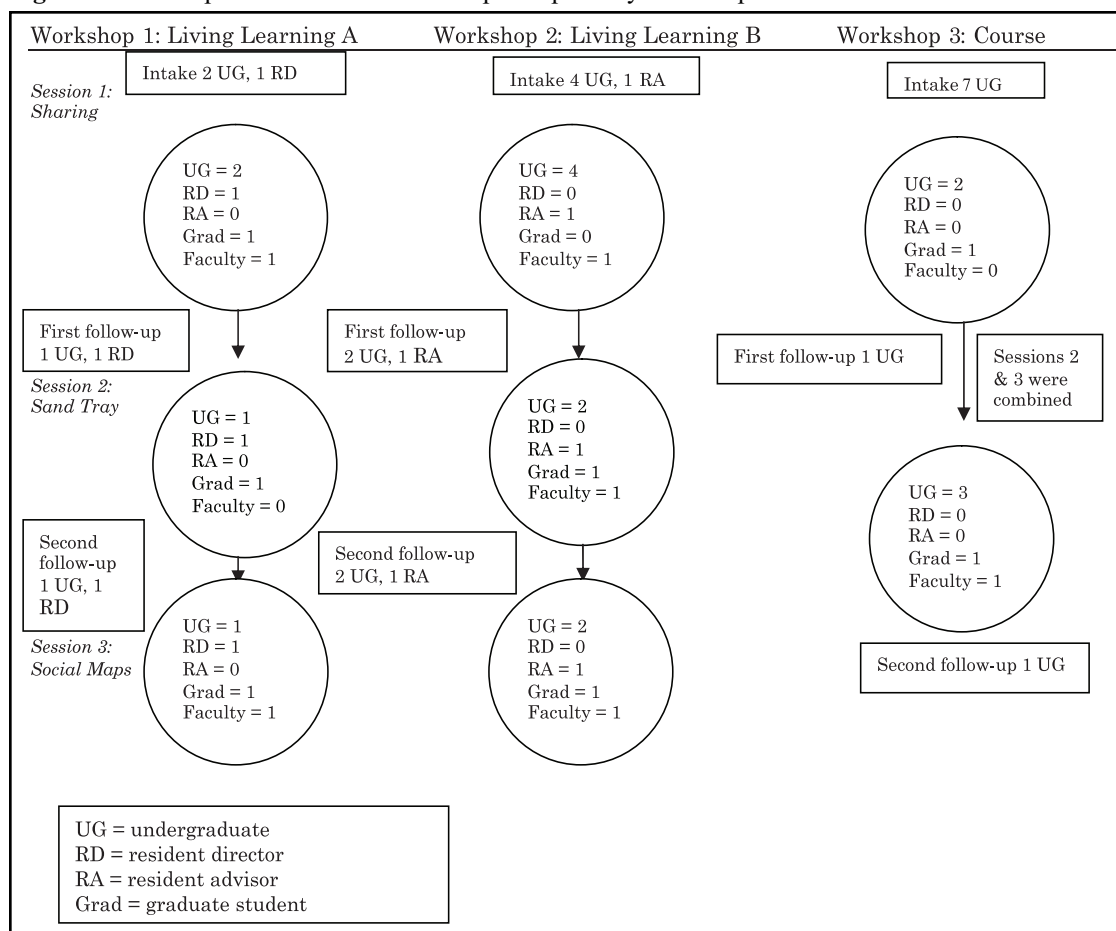
Participants

Figure 1 indicates the number of participants from each segment of the university involved in the workshops and research, including the numbers of undergraduates and residential staff who were interviewed for the research project. We chose to interview residential staff as well as first- and second-year undergraduates because of the staff's close involvement in the transitional experience of entering students.

Facilitators

Two of the authors of this article, Adele Baruch-Runyon and Auguste Elliott, facilitated the workshops and conducted the intake and follow-up interviews. We saw our understanding of the interviews enhanced by our involvement in the student workshops, as they provided us with opportunities to hear about student and staff participants' worlds.

However, we believe that our assessments of the workshops themselves would have been enhanced by the collection of independently administered workshop evaluations, a step we failed to integrate into our project design. The only group

Figure 1 Workshop attendees and interview participants by workshop session

assessment tool we used was a nonpublished *Indicators of Stress Scale* administered at the intake and second follow-up interviews. We found the results inconclusive for a number of reasons including their administration by facilitators, the length between first and second administration (which allowed for the involvement of many intervening factors in the reduction of stress), and our redesign of previously normed and validated scales.

We also tracked participant interactions through the use of participant-observation process notes taken during the third workshop session for each group. These observations were recorded by the facilitators, not allowing for objectivity and range in the workshop assessment process. While our workshop assessment proved inconclusive, we found that our research approach to the collection of students' stories on their entry-year experience yielded extremely rich data that we were able to refine in follow-up interviews.

Focus Group

We used a focus group for the final refinement of our interpretation of the data. Held after we established preliminary findings, this focus group was constituted of participants from our workshops as well as faculty, staff, and administrators particularly interested in students' entry-year experience. We held a dinner meeting in which we presented our preliminary findings and invited feedback in relation to our analysis. The meeting attendees also met in working groups focused on implications of the research for future university planning.

Workshop Content

The first workshop session started with introductions. Then, using the prompt "try to picture yourself doing something you love to do," we facilitated guided imagery to help interviewees focus on past experiences of psychological and physical integration. We then offered an art experience

design to concretize the visions from the guided imagery. After the art experience, we led both dyadic and whole-group sharing.

The second session focused on sharing and listening to individuals' stories about their "worlds" as depicted through a sand tray creation made by each participant. Initial sharing was first communicated in dyads and then in the full group. Before they heard their partner tell about their own world, participants were asked to reflect on the assumptions they had made about their partner's world. After a group discussion of this experience, we conducted a shorter exercise focused on mapping or representing their current, immediate social network on a large piece of paper. Participants were asked to circle, or somehow represent, areas they wished were different. Again, sharing was in dyads and in the whole group.

The final session focused again on participants' social maps. We asked for volunteers to role play, using psychodramatic approaches to promote added perspective on relational issues, on the areas of their worlds that they wished were different. Some members of the group participated directly in the role plays while others participated as observers. Each group member was invited to share feedback both about feelings elicited during the experience as well as thoughts and analysis of the issues involved.

Following the role play, the group experience concluded with a brief, guided mediation, during which members were asked to attend to their breath (with suggestions to consciously deepen breath to facilitate a relaxed state) and to remember the images they had created during the first session. We then suggested that they anchor their feelings with a symbol that represented that experience to them. Participants were invited to take their maps and portraits but with their permission, we took photographs of their work. We promised to E-mail or call for a follow-up meeting.

We hoped that students would use the skills learned in the workshops to plan an activity that could enlarge the group and engage others. We left them with encouragement to meet with the residential staff and faculty participants and plan their own follow-up group activity. Modest funds were set aside to support the activity, as was a stipend for the faculty participant to attend the activity.

Interviews

As indicated on Figure 1, our interviews consisted of intakes, conducted several weeks before the first workshop session, and follow-up inter-

views. The first follow-up interview was conducted at the end of the semester during which the workshop was held, and the second follow-up interview was conducted during the next semester. The first and second follow-up interviews were informed by our initial analysis of the intake interviews as well as the questions generated by the process observations made during the final group.

Intakes. Intake interviews were relatively brief but provided us the opportunity to see if the workshop would be appropriate for the students involved. They also allowed us to explain a disclosure statement to students interested in participating in the research.

During the intake interview the following questions were asked:

1. Have you had any previous group or workshops experience?
2. How would you describe your level of stress now?
3. How do you usually respond to change?
4. What is your cultural/community background?
5. What do you anticipate being most challenging this semester?
6. What strengths, coping skills, and supports do you bring with you?

Follow-up interviews. During the first follow-up interview the following questions were asked:

1. What has been particularly challenging during this semester?
2. Have you begun to make connections with other students and faculty?
3. Have you used any of the coping skills/communication approaches introduced in the workshop?
4. If you had a magic wand and you could change one thing about your experiences here, what would that be?
5. If things changed here, what would you want to keep the same?

We also asked questions based on our initial analysis and our process observations.

In the second follow-up interview, we asked the same questions that we asked in the first follow-up interview, and we added questions based on our ongoing analysis of the interview and observational data. We also added a question about participants' experiences of the follow-up activity. We asked if they participated in the activity and the planning of it. If they answered in the affirmative we asked participants to describe their experience.

Interpretation Using the Hermeneutical Model

Coding and question formation. As Geertz (1979, p. 228) pointed out in relation to anthropological understanding, interviewers are not trying to achieve some kind of “inner correspondence” with their informants; rather they are trying to understand how they translate their world. Toward this end, we used categories for coding the data that emerged directly from participants’ descriptions (i.e., experience-near concepts) as well as concepts that have emerged out of the researchers’ world (i.e., experience-distant).

Geertz (1979, p. 227) described the researcher’s task as putting experience-near concepts in “illuminating connection” with experience-distant concepts. This juxtaposition of concepts is done in an effort to reliably translate symbolic interaction.

I have tried to arrive at this most intimate of notions (of how “self” is defined) not by imagining myself as someone else. . . . a rice peasant or a tribal sheik, and then seeing what I thought but by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms, words, images, institutions, behaviors in terms of which, in each place, people actually represent themselves to themselves and one another. (Geertz, 1979, p. 228)

Using labels such as “balancing competing demands,” we primarily used experience-distant supra-ordinate categories that came out of the interview questions. The subcategories associated with each of the supra-ordinate experience-distant categories were distilled from experience-near descriptions that emerged from interview responses.

Figure 2 shows the process of interpretation using the hermeneutical model and our interview design. The first set of convergent arrows represents open dialogue in the initial interviews (intake interview and first follow-up interview). These lead to an initial, emergent analysis of the data. The divergent arrows from this analysis lead to initial coding as well as a review of group process observations used to help formulate questions for the second follow-up interviews.

The initial coding and questions from the process observations informed the dialogue in the second follow-up interviews. After those interviews, coding and analysis were improved and presented as initial findings. These preliminary conclusions were reintroduced into dialogue with interviewees who participated in a focus group so that the interpretation of meanings could be further refined.

Validation. This research model was used to interpret meaning of student interviews. Therefore,

the forms of validation are different from a model focused on prediction and replication. In our hermeneutical model, we attempt to make “defensible knowledge claims” (as per Kvale, 1995, p. 26) after working with interviewees to ensure that we captured the meaning of their responses.

For example, initial interviews yielded a supra-ordinate category of “challenges of meeting others with similar interests.” Through the dialogues, we initially concluded that more academically oriented students could not find like-oriented peers in freshman residence halls where socialization appeared to revolve around partying. From this interpretation we might have created a subcategory of “partying as primary socialization in the residence halls.”

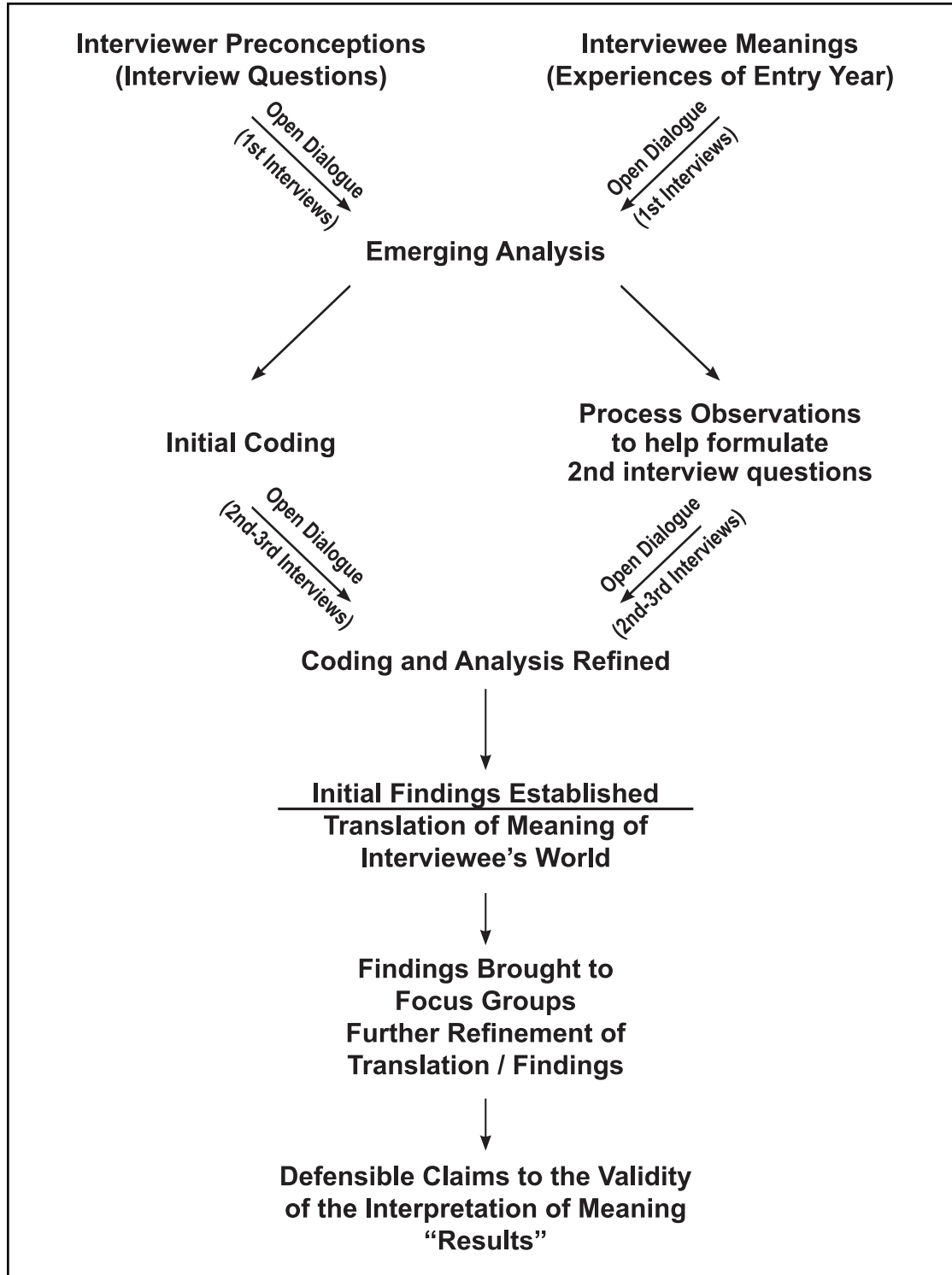
When we shared our interpretation with one of the students in a follow-up interview, she corrected our understanding. She said that when additional, academically and socially related programming was brought into the residence halls, she met a number of students who shared her academic focus. Not all of her peers wanted to party to socialize; instead opportunities to meet peers who would choose to interact over other points of interest were limited. Therefore, the second interview refined our understanding of the challenges associated with meeting others with similar interests and helps illustrate the back-and-forth nature of the analysis.

Process notes. Process observations were used to provide context for understanding the interview data. The observations were focused on quality of interaction among all workshop members. We noted whether levels of interaction had increased or decreased from prior sessions. We also specifically noted the quality of verbal and nonverbal interactions that characterized each student’s participation.

For instance, we observed that one student become highly forthcoming about her struggles with indecision to stay at the university, but this disclosure came only after experiencing considerable faculty and peer support during a role play of a conversation with family members. She subsequently exhibited a rather dramatic change in the level of interaction with others in the group. After noting these interactions in the group, we were able to ask, in a more informed way, about the kinds of student and faculty supports this student experienced during her early weeks on campus.

Findings

The data analyzed include the intakes and the first and second follow-up interviews noted in

Figure 2 Hermeneutical analysis of interview data

Note. The 1st interview refers to the intake interview and 2nd and 3rd interviews refers to follow-up interviews 1 and 2, respectively.

Figure 1. One student transferred out of the university before the second follow-up interview, and three students who participated in the workshop series interviews did not chose to participate in the second follow-up interview. While the numbers of interviews are relatively small, greater depth to the interview was promoted by the shared workshop experience, which appeared to facilitate trust as coping and communication skills were addressed.

The supra-ordinate categories that we developed generally emerged as experience-distant categories based on our questions. All of the subcategories were coded from the words of the participants as experience-near categories.

Four supra-ordinate categories were drawn from our interview questions as well as from the words of the students and staff themselves; they included a) engagement and balance, b) what works and what does not work, c) coping, and d) follow-up connections. The subcategories from these sections emerged from the interviewees' stories.

Engagement and Balance

Connections to other students. Almost all of the interviewees mentioned that students experienced some level of challenge to meet with other students, particularly those who share similar interests. Student A described the challenge of finding students focused on their studies: "Nursing majors don't tend to party so much...some of the girls at [name of dorm] are very different. So that's been a little challenging, but in the past month, I've been meeting more people focused on their studies..."

Student B stated that it was challenging to simply meet others. He explained, "People just stay in their rooms.... There is nothing pulling them out to be social."

Student D talked about the difficulty of meeting others at the very beginning of the semester. "Everyone is new to the university...so no one really knows anyone in the beginning.... It would be helpful if there were different ways to meet each other in the beginning." A third-year student, who is also an RA, noted that the degree of interest in socializing seems to change over the course of the semester:

At the beginning of the year, students are eager to meet others. But later, they've already made some friends, so many of them are not going out much. So it's a question of how do you get them to maintain ties to the whole community.
... (Staff B)

Connections to faculty and department life. Interviewees reported varied experiences with con-

nectedness to faculty and departments upon transition to the university. While professors in lecture classes seemed interested in individual students, others did not convey that interest:

And I took [a class], which was probably a mistake, taking such a hard class first semester. And I was in a big lecture class, and I just couldn't seem to get better than a C in there, and the professor didn't seem too interested in getting to know us, each of us, or in talking.... Now this semester, I'm in a big lecture class in psychology, and the professor seems to want to get to know each of us, and it's very different. (Student C)

Student B spoke of the difficulty in making connections to specific departments: "There are a large number of undeclared majors....The campus needs more events to publicize what a student might become more involved in...to do with the rest of their lives...and a student can learn more about what a department does...."

Student C described being told by an instructor not to bother coming back to class because she was failing:

I ran into a problem with one of my professors this spring....It was a writing course. I took AP writing in high school, so I have some more advanced experience with writing...but there was something either I wasn't getting or she wasn't getting from what I was turning in...I don't know.... But I went in to talk to her...and I don't know, she gave a lot of assignments for kind of bizarre topics...and I wasn't getting something...so I went in to talk to her, to see if there was something more I could do. And she said, "No, there's nothing more, you're failing, so you might as well stop coming, because you're just going to have to take it again next year."

Even when considering that some level of misunderstanding and misinterpretation may characterize the communication between this student and professor, the account clearly demonstrates that this student did not experience interest or engagement with regard to challenges faced in her first-year writing course.

Student E, whose family had immigrated to America, did not find solid connections with her professors until her 5th semester. She stated, "It doesn't look like any of the teachers want to be friendly. It's all business, so I don't bother with that...."

Staff B, a student born and raised in the dominant culture, had entered the university with a clearly identified major and found connecting with faculty members to be easy. "There's the chance to meet faculty and staff who are about your individual success.... That's particularly true in music education."

We found that once well affiliated with a department, some students in our small sample experienced considerable support. However, variable interest and varied information and outreach from departments made the process of making associations sometimes challenging.

Once Student A began to connect with other students in her major, her on-campus experience changed dramatically: "This semester [spring] there are more group projects...so we work together, and even the RA on my floor is a nursing student, and she really gets involved.... We've been studying together."

Balancing competing demands. Most of the students and staff interviewed spoke of the difficulty balancing the demands of schoolwork, employment, and other activities. Staff B, who is a third-year student and RA, described the demands of work, academics, and other activities:

As an RA...this is my 4th semester...sometimes mid-semester, or during juried events...it becomes stressful—getting enough practice time and all. I love my job.... It's my favorite part of life on campus...so the question is, what will captivate people's interests and be fun also...that's the challenge. Sometimes they have trouble balancing work, classes, and activities....

Staff A, the RD, spoke about the balance between life and work, noting the stress of work-related situations that need attention during times when others are off duty: "What's most challenging now...is the ability to separate life and work. You know, most of this work happens after 4:30 and weekends...."

How everything works. A small sample of students come from cultural contexts that are very different than that of the university population. The participants expressed the need for the translation of university life for foreign students. Student E articulated the point well: "Nobody understood. If you have American parents who have gone through it, it is one thing... but we don't have parents that have gone through it.... They assume we know how everything works...." In her second interview, Student E stated, "Other immigrants I talk to are as lost as I am. They

don't know anything about [this university]. Word of mouth.... There is no communication between the programs here and the immigrants."

Effective and Ineffective Support

Affiliation in a chosen major. Several students expressed support from affiliations with students and faculty members in their chosen major. In response to our question about support at the university, Student C replied, "I've applied to be a music major, and I did get in, so I've met with my advisor...." Student A noted her connection to other nursing students, "But I've been reassured by meeting people in nursing. During the weekends, we get together socially. I've made great friends in my major...."

Identifying this level of support in an area of major concentration suggests that identifying an intellectual home may be important early in a student's transition period. Student B spoke about outreach from academic departments as an area that needs improvement.

Support from Residential Life. Another area of support identified by several students and staff is the Department of Residential Life. Several students mentioned a sense of support from it: "Well, Residential Life is very supportive; we're a very close department...." Student C added, "I've found support with the whole RA staff. We've met, and I can talk with them anytime." Staff B explained, "Some of my closest friends are on staff, and some are from last year.... The training process keeps staff connected...."

Staff A stated that she found students participated in programming to the extent that they felt connected to the RA on their floor, "But they have to build that trust in the beginning.... If they did, people looked up to them, and if they offered a program, people showed up."

The importance of a link to student staff suggested the possibility of a student staff role for commuting students. A level of accessibility by students trained and supported by the university may be provided by establishing RA-like roles for non-residential students.

Friendly environment. Several students and staff indicated that they found the campus generally friendly. Student B said, "I was really nervous until my parents dropped me off. But I quickly met 20 or 30 people." Student C explained, "Most people here are friendly, willing to help—both students and staff."

Part of the real world. Two interviewees pointed to the students as part of the real world, who are

therefore focused and purposeful as they pursue their education. Staff A explained:

But at the same time there is something grounded and positive about the fact that students are focused on getting a degree so they can get started with things. I love that students are so real here in that way...that they're not so entitled. They're more immersed in the real world, and I love that about them.

Earlier connection to departments. The need and desire for students to connect earlier with academic departments was echoed in response to the query of the transition experience that students would change. Student B described, "A student can learn more about what a department does...if students connect academically...they will find other connections...."

Even those students well integrated into a major expressed a desire for departments to do more to help students in the beginning of their academic careers. Student A said, "I wish nursing did a little more to help students get together in the beginning—especially for freshmen...."

Staff A wanted to change incoming student attitudes about the role of the university: "Well, if I could change anything...I hate that students come here thinking they are going to transfer....That this isn't the best they could do. There really is a negative attitude like that...I would change that no one sticks around...." She also wishes that fewer students were financially stressed, which she saw as inhibiting their involvement and interest.

Coping

The third supra-ordinate category focused on student use of approaches introduced in the transition-topic workshop sessions. Respondents identified the relaxation-meditation exercises, the social mapping done in preparation for role play, and the sand tray work as useful approaches:

Well, I had never done meditation before, and now, if I'm feeling upset, I'll try to just sit down, take a few breaths, and focus..., and it opened up new ways of looking at things—like when we drew diagrams of the people we were close to... there was no right or wrong way...there were just different ways to look at it....(Student C)

Student A also found the workshop useful, "I've used some of the relaxation. It's helped me to put things in perspective. And the sand tray...definitely. It was so helpful to see the path I'm making

in a very concrete way."

Follow-up connections. Students and staff were forthright about some of the problems, as well as the benefits, of the follow-up activities. While intended to be student initiated, both students and staff felt that the RA staff did more organizing than was optimal. In some instances, they may have lost touch with the interests of the students. Student A provided an example:

The residents wanted to go to Boston, but the RAs thought they actually wanted tubing...so they planned tubing...and only one girl signed up...but the other activities on the floor were fun. Everyone took part in those...and last night there was a dinner and a slide show, which was good. But for the first activity I think they really learned something.... I am definitely going to knock on doors when we try to plan a trip....

Staff A concurred: "Well, the activities on the floor went really well. They were well attended...and I think the students really enjoyed them...but the trip...was mostly planned by the RAs and I think they misread the interest of the students...." If the students are to apply the lessons from the workshop to organize a follow-up activity, it is important for staff to maintain the student-focus of any follow-up work.

Conclusion and Implications

The themes that arose from a majority of the student and staff interviews focused on consistent faculty engagement, support for balancing competing demands, and opportunities to connect with other students with similar interests. An additional theme of translating the university culture did not emerge among a majority of study participants. However, it is supported in the literature (Braxton et al., 2004; Whitt, 2005). We think that the few responses regarding this theme reflects the relatively low number of (self-identified) minority students in our sample ($n = 1$); we do not see it as having diminished significance. The need for translating the university culture ran through each of the three interviews with the minority participant.

We have conceptualized four salient themes as preconditions for student engagement. Following our description of the preconditions, we discuss implications for advising staff and for university-wide programs.

Preconditions for Successful Engagement

Research has pointed to the efficacy of a talent

development philosophy in which institutions intentionally nurture students' social and academic potential while providing them with clear indications of the elements needed for success (Braxton et al., 2004; Kuh et al., 2007). Our findings point to the need for both academic and interpersonal support and guidance very early in a student's first semester. We think of these as the preconditions for successful engagement. The early establishment of facilitative conditions echoes Whitt's (2005, p. 3) recommendations that "institutions make special efforts...throughout those early weeks of college to teach newcomers about campus traditions...and provide other information about 'how we do things here and what things really mean.'"

The preconditions emerging in this study include four elements: support for balancing competing demands, consistent faculty engagement (in classrooms), multiple opportunities for students to connect with other students with similar interests, and the translation of university life for all incoming students, but especially for minority and first-generation students. See Figure 3.

Implications for advising. All of the themes from our interviews suggest that consistent support in learning to navigate the interconnected systems successfully would benefit students. The sooner students become adept at navigating these systems, the sooner they will align with the people and resources necessary to become fully engaged. Advisors must be aware of and involved in the interconnecting systems. This recommendation echoes prior findings that affirm the importance of collaboration and communication across the often isolated units of advising, student life, and academic affairs (Kuh, 1996; Smith, Dai, & Szelest, 2006). The greater the functional collaboration, the easier it will be for all units, including advising, to provide the support needed.

At the university where this research took place, several initiatives have been focused on collaboration, including an entry year course, Choices, Changes, and Careers. The class focuses on self and career exploration, and it also introduces students

to campus resources and support systems. While primarily offered to nondeclared majors, it is open to other students as well. Student services and advising personnel are the instructors for the course, and an advisory team annually reviews the syllabi, evaluations, and informal feedback to make sure that the content is current and valid. Collaborative efforts of this kind enable staff members of each unit to understand fully the resources of other units.

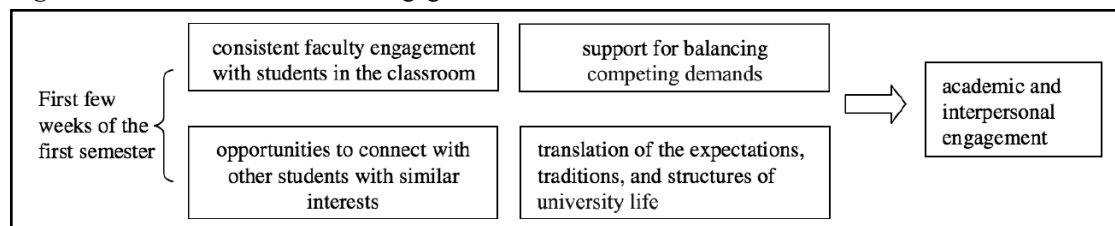
An additional suggestion for supporting minority students as they translate and understand university structures and traditions came up during the focus group discussion. A second-year student suggested the establishment of mentor groups composed of students from specific minority groups on campus. The student suggested that group members can share ways that they have successfully translated the university culture as well as strategies they have used to preserve and celebrate their identities. This student's idea is consistent with the research of Braxton et al. (2004), who found that the value of feeling incorporated into university culture is a precursor of student success. Kuh et al. (2007) have identified the importance of supporting the expression of students' identities and perspectives.

We recommend peer mentoring groups that are as homogeneous as possible in relation to specific identities. In this way, mentoring peers will have related experiences with which to guide and support entering minority students.

Additional recommendations that arose from our focus groups relating to advising units include a university home for undeclared majors. Also, we suggest that formally structured opportunities be made available for first-year students to link with academic departments.

Our interviews indicate that students applied some of the stress reduction and coping skills taught in the workshop sessions. They provided a number of examples of the ways in which these skills supported them during periods of interpersonal or academic stress. Advising units, in collaboration with student life or academic units could offer brief education groups on stress reduction and success-

Figure 3 Preconditions of student engagement



ful communication skills. Ting, Grant, and Plenert (2000) have developed a viable model for supporting students with a focus on noncognitive factors such as positive self-concept and realistic self-appraisal. Their model, also based on small group work, appears to “enhance study skill, GPAs [grade-point averages], and social and cultural adjustment” (Ting et al., p. 359). Braxton et al. (2004) pointed to the usefulness of preventative programs focused on social adjustment for the promotion of ongoing student success.

University-wide programmatic implications. In response to students’ stated wish to meet students and faculty members with whom they share interests, an entry year course has been developed that focuses on building community and the development of student interests and questions into project ideas. The proposed course, *The Exploration of Creative and Research Activities*, will be taught by two faculty, one from Arts and Sciences and one from Counselor Education, as well as two staff from Student Life. It will be offered biweekly, as a one credit course, with one faculty and one staff person at each meeting. Many of the coping and communication skills taught in the *Forging Connections* project groups will be introduced in the course.

Links to campus resources and potential mentors will be established, in formal ways, throughout the course. As a result, students will not only have opportunities to meet with the faculty, they will meet with faculty members who have related interests and might support and guide particular student interests through ongoing research projects.

Additional opportunities to link students to faculty members and departments were suggested by several focus group members. These ideas included departmental open houses scheduled during one afternoon and department tables at scheduled times in the dining halls. In addition, a coordinated break time for classes within specific buildings, where information tables might be available, was suggested.

Suggestions to increase the consistency of faculty engagement include in-service training on engaged learning strategies for the faculty. Also, classes in residence halls might promote student-faculty connections. In faculty reviews, clear expectations must be articulated regarding university community engagements to fulfill the service component.

Limitations

The small number of students in this sample precludes the generalizability of the findings regard-

ing the first-year experience. However, the method with which we encouraged and gathered student stories may be replicated. In those university or college settings where similar challenges affect student engagement (e.g., difficulties in meeting students with similar interests, inconsistent faculty engagement, competing demands, and the need to translate university culture), our programmatic suggestions may be useful.

If universities wish to replicate the investigative design, through the use of groups focused on communication and coping, follow-up interviews, and focus groups, we strongly recommended that counseling professionals are involved in the project team. The group processes used may evoke significant thoughts and feelings, and students will be best served if at least one of the facilitators is trained at leading and integrating the activities.

Areas for Continued Study

A greater understanding and fuller descriptions of the entry-year experience from the perspective of minority students are needed. A better informed university can more successfully translate university culture, creating a welcoming environment for minority students. The findings in this study are consistent with the recommendations of Kuh et al. (2007), who asserted the need for institutional efforts to integrate students of color into predominantly White academic communities and be sensitive to their needs and concerns. With questions that are shaped by the responses of the current study, we have initiated continued interviews of entry-year minority students. In addition, research into successful support efforts for nonresidential students might encourage stakeholders to institute structures that promote engagement and to consider realistically the competing demands faced by commuting students.

In this preliminary research, students described a personal inclination toward and comfort with change. Perhaps these students and self-selected upperclassmen can assist in a RA-like role to groups of commuting students. Investigation is needed to examine possible structures for commuting students that might build upon those foundations that have successfully served residential students.

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