Abstract

Educational institutions have been entrusted with the authority and responsibility to help students become responsible and productive members of society. This thrust begins at first year level and throughout the entire educational programme. Expected progress and improved results would be realized if educational institutions made the provision of survival skills to first year students a priority. This paper intends to highlight the value that survival skills can add to the total development of students. Survival skills for first years would ensure that students are better equipped to deal with challenges of their newly acquired environment in a constructive and meaningful way. The last part of the paper discusses the survival skills programme that is offered by the University of Johannesburg to all first year students. Every student registering with a college or university brings along a wide variety of problems which among others include adjustment issues, lack of clearly defined goals and failure to focus on what matter most. These problems, if not properly addressed have a potential to distract new students from attaining their educational goals and aspirations.

1. Introduction

The University of Johannesburg is a comprehensive institution situated in the Gauteng Province of the Republic of South Africa. It has a student population of about 45000 and it offers a wide range of academic and career-focused programmes which are spread over five campuses. The first year experience at university or college can be very traumatic to new students. In a research conducted at the University of Johannesburg it was found that many students fail to settle in
their first year (Exner, 2003). This finding illustrates that institutions need to have effective and pertinent programmes that will help first year students accomplish their educational goals.

Experience in dealing with first year students indicates that students bring along problems such as poor academic backgrounds, unclearly defined goals and family related challenges. Sermones (1991, p.63) states that “Those entering college or a private career school for the first time often experience a rude awakening. College for example is different from high school in several respects” All these issues significantly affect overall adjustment of the first year student.

This presentation intends to highlight the problems that first year students are faced with when arriving at the University of Johannesburg. It also discusses the survival skills programme that is offered by the University of Johannesburg. The survival skills programme is facilitated through the following phases:

- Orientation which is designed to help new students adjust better
- Residence development team which is made up of a multi-disciplinary team. It runs programmes aimed at helping new students deal with distractions of new environments in a constructive and meaningful way
- Peer-helping which is facilitated by fellow senior students.

2. Why survival skills programme?

New environments often make demands on students and first year students are overwhelmed by these demands. Some of these students end up loosing focus. Some drop out before they realize their educational ambitions. The above is supported by Exner (2003) when she points out that many students fail to settle in their first year. The University of Johannesburg ‘s survival skill programme does not differ much from lifeskill in that it also equips students with the skills necessary to cope with the demands of their new environment. Hopson and
Scally (1981: 63) argue that “The greater the range of skills a person possesses, the greater the range of alternatives available to her”. This is exactly what the survival skills programme for first year students seeks to achieve. “The College experience for most students is a stressful one that affects physical, and emotional well-being” (Upcraft et. al. 1984, p.20). The greatest asset for year students would be the ability to respond effectively to the realities and challenges of their new environments (College or University).

The survival skills programme is intended to benefit first year students in the following manner:

- Promoting wellness through enhancement of healthy holistic growth and development
- By identifying problems in advance and enhance coping skills. This further intends to facilitate achievement of their educational goals.

In her study Exner (2003) points out that many students suffer from a fear of failure. They associate failure with the following:

- A huge drop in self-esteem;
- As first generation students many are under tremendous pressure to perform;
- Disappointing parents who sacrifice at great cost to provide an opportunity for further education;
- Having to leave the institution;
- Repeating a year will add immense financial burden to a struggling family;
- Having to wait one year longer before becoming economically independent;

Clark (2005, p.297) refers to a study conducted by Terenzini et al (1994, p.68) that “Finally, in addition to classroom activities, students indicated that the “real learning” of the transition process included developing “survival skills” (e.g. money and time management skills, personal goal setting); developing the self-discipline to just do it when a task or obligation was recognized; taking responsibility for one’s physical,
financial and academic well-being; and developing of oneself and one’s goals through interactions with faculty and peers who held goals, attitudes; or values different from the student’s”.

The above clearly indicates that new students need support to succeed academically and socially. This also points out that transition issues for first year students are serious and should not be taken lightly by any institution. The survival skills programme further helps the students to devise ways in which they can address challenges and hurdles they come across within the institution.

3. Survival Skills Phases

3.1. Phase 1

ORIENTATION

THE MEANING OF ORIENTATION

- It is the transition cushion between past and future learning experiences and remains one of the most effective activities in student retention
- It is a mechanism whereby students are better equipped to define their educational purpose and a way of introducing them to opportunities and constraints within the University environment.
- It is therefore worthy of institutional attention

THE GOALS OF ORIENTATION

- It serves as a link between pre-UJ and UJ experiences
- It introduces the student to the environment, encouraging exploration and interaction
- It serves as a socializing tool for the student
- It introduces available institutional services
• It transmits the values and expectations of the University of Johannesburg
• It strives to make the student feel welcome
• It introduces the student to the survival skills necessary in the institution
• It eases parental anxiety as to what the student will be encountering.

WHO BENEFITS FROM ORIENTATION?

• Students who gain insight and knowledge
• Students who are able to bond with others, discover mentors and master the logistics of the environment
• Parents who have some understanding of what lies ahead for the student
• Faculty members who then meet with students who have some idea of requirements and expectations
• the university as it offers a timeous, professional and economical method of programme and personal presentation as well as fostering student development and aiding retention

WHERE SHOULD ORIENTATION LEAD?

If well-conducted, it should lead to:

• more realistic expectations from parents and students
• more effective participation in the educational process by both student & parent
• raising institution awareness of student needs and a chance to enhance the learning and retention qualities of the University of Johannesburg
• A lowering of attrition rate.

ORIENTATION ACTIVITIES
During orientation the following activities take place:

- A Big welcome by faculty and management of the institution
- Introduction to support service departments
- A picnic organized Student Governance (SRC)

3.2. Phase 2

This part of the programme is comprised of intensive presentations facilitated by the Student counselling Department. The presentations cover a wide spectrum of topics ranging from:

- **Adjustment issues**

Social adjustments can be difficult for many new students. When engaging with people and new situations, various risks are involved for which the student may or may not be ready to take. The survival skills programme takes into account that the manner in which the new student gets involved with the variety of new groups and communities on campus will have a significant influence on his or her general well-being. Freenstra et. al (2001:106) quotes (Ezezek; 1994 and Holmbek & Wandrei 1993) when they say “Some students adjust well to the college environment, whereas others struggle with the transition, some leaving school together”. The above points out to the important role that the survival skills programme plays in helping students acquire adaptation skills. One of the challenges of new students is to adapt to the new academic and social environments.

Some of these students have never been outside their home environments before. For a smooth transition to be realized Clark (2005, p.312) emphasizes that “College roles need to be discussed with students throughout the freshman year”.

- **Self awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence**
Many people fail to take advantage of their interests, abilities and strengths due to lack of self-awareness. Carter et al (2003, p.14) state that “When people believe in their value and capacities, their self-esteem fuels their motivation to succeed”. It is therefore essential that every new student is helped to develop a better understanding of self which help build self-confidence and a positive self-esteem.

- **Decision making and problem solving**

More often, students find themselves in situations where they have to make decisions. Helping student acquire good decision making skills will enable them to take decisions that are fulfilling and satisfying. They should know what constitutes a good or bad decision.

- **Time management**

Time management is a necessity for most students. Sharf (2001: 44) affirms that time is a precious resource and individuals be it students or employees should avoid wasting time. His advice is that people should learn to prioritize and should stick to their plans. He further contends that “Using schedules and planners to organize time works for many students, but you might have to keep revising and changing your schedules and plans”.

- **Learning styles, presentation skills and study skills**

New students tend to be overwhelmed by the demands made upon them and the amount of workload that is given to them. Without any help, they are likely to struggle with their academic work and thus a need for some guidance in this area. They need to realize that a college or university is different from a high school in many respects. Students are taught in large groups and the work given to students
a greater degree of independence. “The feeling of being lost or overwhelmed by the material is not only uncomfortable; it also makes it difficult to concentrate” (Sharf, 2001, p.28. To remedy this situation new students are exposed to a variety of learning styles that help them to cope with their academic work.

- **Examination and test writing**

Before and during examinations students often experience anxieties associated with test-taking, examinations, and uncertainties about the future. The need to manage feelings of anxiety and tension is becoming increasingly necessary.

- **Social survival skills**

Many young people fall into the trap of doing things just because they see other people doing them. Perhaps the reason for this is that a young person needs to belong and be accepted by a particular group. A person whose life is directed by others ends up not knowing where he is going. The survival skills programme is geared towards helping first year make the right choices and decisions and also alert them of the repercussions of bad choices.

- **Goal setting and motivation**

New students need help in setting realistic goals and achieving them. Goals are very useful in that they:

  - Provide a sense of direction (Where am I going)?
  - Are guides for action (How do I get there)?
  - Serve as a source of motivation

- **Stress management**

Like any other students, first year students are inclined to suffer from stress during the transitional period. The switch from high school to college or university is stress on its own. According to Fisher (1994, p.39) “Change and transition are common
features of life, often associated with upward mobility, but the process of change have powerful negative effects on well being and health”. It is for this reason that stress management was incorporated into the survival skills programme.

- **Financial management skills**

The fact that many of the first year students never handled a budget let alone earning a salary before has a potential to cause stress to new students. Now, the student has to focus on:

- Managing the budget which involves deciding what the financial necessities, not luxuries are.
- Looking for ways to spend less, if possible

- **HIV/AIDS and other health related issues**

In order to have a healthy student body, it is necessary to give students information pertaining to HIV/AIDS and other health related issues. This is seen as a proactive measure that any caring institution can have for its student population. The scourge of HIV/AIDS requires that institutions place the health and well-being of students high in the list of priorities.

- **Assertiveness skills**

The training in assertiveness helps students to express both positive and negative feelings openly and direct. Here, students are helped to deal with situations in their own lives where they are unable to be assertive. Those who, for example have difficulty in initiating interaction with others, could be assisted to develop more effective social skills. One of the most desired needs for students is to be effectively assertive. They should be in a position to give and receive feedback and initiate dialogues with others.
The need to develop assertiveness skills is often taken lightly. Denny (1993:41) argues that “... in reality many people do have difficulty in refusing other people’s demands as well as communicating with either friends, colleagues or more particularly people at work”. Many people see the need to be assertive but not really sure how to go about developing it. In order for first years not to be vulnerable, it is imperative that they are helped to express what they think, what they see and how they feel without feeling guilty or ashamed. They should be helped not to confuse assertiveness with being aggressive and arrogant.

### 3.3. PHASE 3

- **Classroom presentations**
  
  A time slot is given on the timetable for ongoing classroom presentations.

- One hour presentations scheduled during lunch times. This is done to accommodate students who cannot visit the department during normal hours due to their tight schedules. Some of these presentations focus on study habits. According to Exner (2003) “the advice from numerous student development practitioners for the student is to develop sound study habits right from the start of the first term.

- **RESIDENCE DEVELOPMENT TEAM**

  - Initiated by the Dean of Student Affairs in 2000
  - Each department in the Division gets involved in assisting the Residence Manager towards the orientation, adjustment and support of the first year student in the Residence.

The residence development team also attempts to make residences become both academic and social environments. The residence environments provide students with the opportunity to interact with their peers which in turn contribute to their total
development. Li et al. (2005:188) indicate that “students who are more involved with roommates or other students will hold a more positive view of social inclusion, which enhances their sense of community and social integration”.

- The RDT serves as a pool of expertise to support the Residence Manager in the Development of the residence
- Facilitates student’s success and wellbeing on social physical, psychological and academic issues
- Mentoring and support team to both the students and the Residence manager
- Aims towards whole person growth and education
- Aims at improving outreach and availing themselves at all times
Presentations at residences facilitated by the Residence Development Teams, whose role is to identify problems with a view to developing support programmes. These programmes are proactive in nature in that they are aimed at preventing problems from occurring.
4. Overall evaluation of program

The programme is evaluated through the use of questionnaires. The belief is that knowing what students think about the programme helps the institution to determine which aspects of the student life needs more attention. This also helps in obtaining clear indication regarding the benefits that new students derive from the programme. In the survey conducted in 2005 the following came to the fore:

**Social skills**

![Social skills graph]

**Summary of Graph:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve overall adjustments</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make friends</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand myself &amp; others</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve my confidence as a first year student</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handle overall stress</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Academic skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop good study habits</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve ability to manage time</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be aware of my learning style and preferred study methods</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare for examination &amp; test writing</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**GENERAL LIFE SKILLS**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manage my finances</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be familiar with other services within</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the university</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get necessary help when need arises</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Due to the small sample, the views expressed by participants in the survey cannot be considered representative of the experiences of all new students. Nevertheless, it is a step towards the right direction.

4.1. Limitations of the programme

- Because it is not compulsory some students do not take it seriously
- Lack of financial resources makes it difficult to sustain
- Lack of a buy-in from other sections of the institutions
- In some instances the orientation programme coincides with registration and as a result students become confused

4.2. Successes
• Able to reach-out to a significant number of first who would be lost to the system if there was no such a programme.

• Immediately after orientation students begin to use the services

• Students become more aware of the services available on campus and this leads to an increase in referrals

4.3. Recommendations

Ideally, attendance or participation into the programme should be made mandatory for all first year students. This will ensure that all students benefit from it.

5. References

Clark, M (May-June 2005)  **Negotiating the Freshmen Year: Challenges and Strategies Among First-Year College students**, Journal of College Student Development, vol 46 no.3, 223-337


Li, Y., McCoy, E, Shelley 11, M.C., Whalen, D.F (March-June 2005).  **Contributors to Student Satisfaction with Special Program, (Fresh Start) Residence Halls.** Journal of College Student Development, vol.46, no.2, 115-221
