Developmental Mismatch among Freshman College Students:
Using First-Year Seminars to Bridge the Gap

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Why do some students thrive academically, emotionally, and socially during their first year of college while other students struggle to pass their courses, manage their time and meet friends? What causes some students to experience negative psychological development and decreased levels of motivation? And why do some students withdrawal from the university after only one semester? These questions are at the center of this research. In this paper, we critically examine a person-environment fit model for freshman students as they make the transition to university life. This model proposes that individuals (students) may experience negative motivational consequences when they are in environments (universities) that do not fit well with their needs. We propose that some of the negative psychological changes and decreased levels of motivation that some freshman experience result from a developmental mismatch between students’ psychological needs and opportunities afforded by their social environments. Using self-determination theory, a popular perspective on intrinsic motivation, we explore ways to assist students in making the transition to university life an easier and more pleasant one. We propose that First-Year Seminars may help bridge the gap for many students by creating developmentally appropriate social environments that foster optimal psychological development and intrinsic motivation.

Developmental mismatch

According to the person-environment fit model, for good psychological development to occur there should be a fit between a person’s environment and their psychological needs (Hunt, 1975). For adolescents, this environment usually is the
school environment since this is where they spend the majority of their time. Their psychological needs can be described as the necessary mental conditions that when met lead to optimal self concept and adaptive behaviors. Developmental psychologists have written about the developmental mismatch that occurs between adolescents and the junior high school environment, based upon the needs of adolescents and the structure of the school (Eccles, Midgely, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, MacIver, 1993). We argue this developmental mismatch continues to occur, and may even be augmented, as students make the transition to university life. Below, we examine several of the characteristics that late adolescents exhibit as they make the transition from high school to the university, noting how these characteristics are often at odds with university practices.

For many students this is the first time they experience high degrees of autonomy. Most have never lived away from home for an extended time, and are now overwhelmed with the autonomy they experience in everyday activities. They don’t have curfews to adhere and may have difficulty managing their time to satisfy both academic and social activities. Some students may experiment with drugs or alcohol or may engage in other risk-taking behaviors such as sexual promiscuity. Many freshmen make poor choices that affect their academic performance. For example, many courses don’t have attendance policies and some students see this lack of accountability as a reason for skipping class. In an environment where students are offered unlimited autonomy, many students are not able to make responsible decisions that will have positive outcomes.
When students arrive on campus they may experience feelings of isolation that result from separation from friends and loved ones. Many students are involved in long distance romantic relationships and make promises to return home for weekend visits. Although freshman students are often assigned a room mate, personality conflicts or cultural differences may prevent friendships from forming. Particularly at larger universities, freshman may find themselves enrolled in large lecture-style courses where they experience anonymity. Often they find themselves seated beside a new person each class instead of traveling to classes with the same peer group. They also may not be able to build a strong relationship with university faculty in large classes like they did in high school classes. For students who experienced popularity in high school, the transition to university life may be especially difficult. Many students experience a “big fish in a little pond” effect in high school. However, the social hierarchy at many college campuses places freshman in the bottom strata. For example, there may be steep competition to qualify for sports teams or campus clubs. In short, many freshman may experience little sense of belongingness on college campuses as they make the transition to university life.

Finally, many students may have low perceptions of their academic competence during their first semester. Often students aren’t familiar with the expectations for successful academic performance in a college environment. Even students who experienced a high degree of academic success in high school may find themselves performing at lower levels than they anticipated. Although a multitude of reasons may explain students poor academic performance such as poor study strategies or time management, in many cases, students may find that they aren’t well prepared for the types of assignments and exams that are administered in university courses. Recent
research indicates that the single best predictor of a student’s college success is the academic rigor they experienced in high school (US Department of Education, 2006). For low income or minority students, who typically makeup the enrollments at less rigorous high schools, this may be particularly disturbing as these groups may be at risk. Other times, freshman may find themselves enrolled in general education courses that are outside their areas of expertise or interest. The lack of background knowledge combined with low levels of intrinsic motivation often result in less than satisfactory academic performance. Student’s perceived competence is particularly important because it influences future behaviors such as task engagement, strategy use, and effort and perseverance. Students who aren’t academically successful during their first semester find themselves at risk for academic probation, athletic ineligibility, or problems with financial aid.

The structure of the college environment is usually one that emphasizes autonomy, where students are responsible for managing their time, course work, and making responsible decisions. Opportunities for socializing abound. Many students form life long friendships during their college years and many engage in romantic relationships that lead to marriage or companionship. Organizations such as fraternities and sororities as well as clubs, extracurricular activities, and athletic teams are ways for students to meet and form relationships with other students. Finally, the goal of universities is to prepare students for a career. This means teaching them competence in a chosen area of study as well as in general education courses that provide a general knowledge. Student may find themselves challenged by unfamiliar academic content and also unfamiliar with university practices such as grading on a curve or using higher level critical thinking skills rather than superficial learning strategies. Given that

**Self Determination Theory**
Most educators, and parents for that fact, will identify life-long learning as a primary goal for their students. We want our students to be intrinsically motivated to learn and to experience academic success. This manifests itself in learning of academic content, becoming a well rounded and productive citizen, and fostering a good sense of self-worth. In short, we want our students to achieve a meaningful, quality college education. Most educators would argue that students should feel intrinsically motivated to attain this, not pressured by parents or teachers.

According to self-determination theory, students’ motivation can range from extrinsic in nature, where students perform simply because it leads to a particular outcome or reward to intrinsic in nature, where students learn because they find it inherently interesting and enjoyable (Deci & Moller, 2005). This model presents three necessary conditions that must exist for optimal intrinsic motivation to occur: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. With regard to autonomy, individuals must perceive their behaviors as self determined. That is, they must not feel external pressures to engage in behaviors. Competence suggests that individuals must experience high levels of success. That is, tasks must be optimally challenging that allow individuals to experience satisfaction with the outcome. Relatedness refers to individual’s perceptions of belongingness. That is, they must be emotionally connected to others and perceive a sense of belonging.

Research by Deci and his colleagues (e.g., Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981; Ryan & Deci, 2000) have consistently found that satisfying these three needs relates to enhanced motivation and well-being. Individuals’ enhanced motivation and well-being also is associated with
increased levels of intrinsic motivation related to learning which results in higher-quality learning and increased creativity

**First-Year Seminars**

Although there are many different types of first-year seminars on campus, we focus our attention of a University 101 type seminar. This type of seminar is conducted in conjunction with an entry-level class providing an introduction to the university experience, with emphasis on assisting students in selecting or exploring a major course of study. Course topics discussed in the course include: general education, academic advising, exploring a major, problem-based learning, cultural diversity, civic engagement, academic integrity, conflict resolution, and learning communities. Seminars are offered in conjunction with a required English composition course and one other course that fills the university’s general education curriculum requirements. In addition to sharing the same block of classes, students participate in a living learning community by being placed in a shared residence hall.

The first year seminar can be constructed to facilitate the necessary conditions for intrinsic motivation to occur in our students. Below we outline characteristics of First-Year Seminars that correlate with conditions of intrinsic motivation:

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics for optimal development</th>
<th>Characteristics First Year Seminars</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>autonomy</td>
<td>• Through use of PBL, students become familiar with consequences for poor decisions (e.g., plagiarism, alcohol abuse)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Developmental Mismatch</th>
<th>Course teaches the general education curriculum requirements so that students have some autonomy when registering for future courses.</th>
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| relatedness             | Living learning community---students take several classes as a community  
Participation in service learning activity during 1st two week of class  
Required to attend events at university (e.g., cultural event, extracurricular event, athletic event).  
Peer mentor to provide emotional support  
Course instructor is students advisor |
| competence              | Course teaches problem based learning strategies and information literacy  
Course teaches study strategies |
| • Peer mentor to offer advice in course registration & tutoring |
| • Course provides support for exploring a major and uses career services |
| • In reflective journals, all students comment that seminar has helped them achieve their academic goals. |

It is our belief that First Year Seminars can be constructed to facilitate the necessary conditions for intrinsic motivation to develop and to minimize the negative psychological consequences for students. We believe that by helping students feel autonomous, relatedness, and competent, we foster their self-determination for life-long learning and create a more developmentally appropriate social environment that eases the transition to university life for most students.
References


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