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CONTENTS

Ensuring Successful Transitions for Emancipated Foster Care Youth: A Conversation With Jacob Okumu

On many college campuses, a major gap exists between the needs of emancipated foster care youth and support services provided. As the National Resource Center's 2012-2013 Paul P. Fidler Grant recipient, Jacob O. Okumu of Ohio University explored the nature of this gap from the students' perspectives. Below, he discusses their unique challenges and needs and offers strategies institutions can implement to ensure they make a successful transition to college. His study will be published in the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* in November 2014.

How did you become interested in emancipated foster care youth in higher education as a research topic?

Toward the end of my first year of residency requirement as a PhD student, I was working as an academic advisor and mentor of first-generation college students at Ohio University. I advised sophomore students on academic probation and on the verge of being academically dismissed from college. My charge was to ensure that they achieved the required grades to remain on track to graduation. Together, we explored and designed tailored interventions based on their unique family backgrounds, professional interests, personal challenges, and abilities.

Most of all, we developed a relationship based on trust. They shared their stories with so much passion that I came to know their life journeys fairly well. Some of those students had had foster care experiences and described how those experiences shaped their lives before and after enrolling in college. They also talked at length about how some of the college campus programs seemed to intentionally exclude or isolate them. Among those programs were family-themed weekends.

However, the critical incident that led to this research was when, at the end of the semester, the entire college shut down, including residence halls. Some of these students asked whether I could house them for the break, as they had no other place to go. That is when I started asking how these students made meaning of the transition into higher education and how the structure of our college campus environments impacted their transition, academic success, and identity formation.

What are the biggest challenges these youth face as they transition into college?

Isolation and engagement are primary challenges. Feelings of isolation make it difficult for them to connect with others and, therefore, inhibit their engagement on campus. Consequently, some intentionally decide not to make their foster care experiences known with peers, faculty, or staff for fear of further estrangement and negative perceptions from the campus community.

How are the needs of these students different from traditional first-year students?

Unlike many college students, the emancipated foster youth transitioning into college are less likely to obtain material support or other forms of mentorship or sponsorship from biological relatives. Most of them report multiple foster care and school placements, which impacts their college preparatory skills as well as effective engagement with college preparatory opportunities, such as TRIO programs. They are also likely to be inadequately prepared for the financial demands of independent living in general and college life in particular.

How are these youth overcoming those challenges? How are they making them into positives?

In their view, college enrollment is helping them see themselves in a new way, providing them control over and defining their identity—themselves—for the first time relative to their foster care experience. One stated: "Yes, we have been hurt in foster care, but that is not what we are. We can be who we want to be in life. We can succeed in life." Many of them are optimistic about the future for the first time in their lives, or at least for a very long time.

On the other hand, while not having family support created feelings of loneliness, students also saw transitioning into college as a foundation for increased self-sufficiency and self-reliance. College was providing them with an opportunity to become autonomous and self-directed in personally chosen values. Indeed, others experienced a sense of empowerment as they developed skills allowing them to trust, seek help, and rely on others for some kind of support—an ability that may have been damaged by the instability of their experiences in foster care.

You report that a gap exists between the current college support services provided and the needs of emancipated foster youth entering higher education. What are the most effective strategies institutions can develop to fill this gap and help emancipated youth make the transition to college and persist to graduation?

Transitioning into college poses significant challenges for all college students. However college transition programs for this population could be tailored to focus more on building consistent, trusting relationships with other students, faculty, and staff.

"Yes, we have been hurt in foster care, but that is not what we are. We can be who we want to be in life. We can succeed in life."

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Institutions might begin by identifying policies and programs that contribute to feelings of isolation and estrangement and make appropriate accommodations for foster youth. Some of the interventions might include campus-structured and regular-themed gatherings during the school year for student integration and engagement and alternate housing during breaks, among others. Formalized mentoring relationships extending throughout the college years between new and returning students with foster care experience can also provide opportunities to develop valuable interpersonal relationship and leadership skills while supporting holistic identity formation.

Finally, academic advising sessions ought to allow us to know our students well enough to care about their development as whole people. This will enable us to build a mentoring relationship based on trust. If there is no department dedicated to helping these students and you happen to know a student with foster care experience, at least inquire about their needs and refer them to appropriate resources. These students might not always be disposed to asking for help but may be very open to support trusted others provide.

Why is implementing and achieving institutional change important for emancipated foster youth? Has your research had an impact on programs to help these students transition to higher education at your institution or others?

The percentage of former emancipated youth entering college and persisting to graduation is lower compared to other young adults. Arguments have been advanced for the promotion of diversity in different facets of higher education in the United States. Fostering strategies that ensure enrollment and retention of this population will advance the cause for diversity. Otherwise, institutions of higher learning will remain silos of indifference with little connection to realities of our society today.

To effect change, institutions could start by creating a task force that reflects the main areas of transitional challenges for this population. My study identified admissions, enrollment, housing, financial aid, health care, holistic advising, and accessibility services as places to start. At the moment, I am part of a task force that is charged with the design and implementation of a mentoring program for this student population at my own institution.

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Using Educationally Purposeful Activities to Support First-Generation College Students in Chemistry

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Research continues to show that student engagement promotes success in college as measured by first-year grade-point averages (GPAs) and first-to-second-year persistence (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). In fact, a student's degree of engagement is considered a better predictor of first-year performance than many other precollege metrics, such as ACT or SAT scores (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Cruce, Wolniak, Siefert, & Pascarella, 2006).

Hu and Kuh (2002) suggested that student engagement is attainable through educationally purposeful activities (EPAs), which are characterized by (a) student time on task, (b) use of institutional resources, and (c) student-faculty or student-peer interactions on substantive topics.

Multi-institutional assessment instruments (e.g., NSSE) show that students who are involved with EPAs generally have higher GPAs than those who are not (Kuh et al., 2006). The effect appears to be more pronounced for students entering college with more than one risk factor (e.g., first-generation status, low-income background). For these students, involvement in EPAs has a conditional compensatory effect on first-year academic GPA.

After the introduction of the biochemistry major at Huntingdon College in 2005, the number of majors in the Chemistry and Biochemistry Program quadrupled over the next five years. Along with this growth, we saw a rise in the number of first-generation college students from 40% prior to 2005, to more than 60% in 2005. In addition, we observed a decrease of the average ACT (composite) score of majors in our program from 27 pre-2005 to 23-24 from 2005 to 2013. These changes in our student profile led us to be proactive in providing additional opportunities for student success. We introduced 15 EPAs in one of the four categories: (a) participation in faculty-directed undergraduate research, (b) involvement in discipline-specific mentoring programs, (c) active involvement in professional or preprofessional organizations, and (d) professional development (Table 1).

We generally noticed that majors who were most involved in department-level EPAs appeared to perform better than students who seemed relatively disengaged. This notion was especially true for many of our first-year majors, many of whom came to Huntingdon College in pursuit of notoriously challenging goals (e.g., medical/pharmacy/dental school, professional research). Here, we report the connection between student involvement in department-level EPAs and corresponding GPAs in the first year and beyond.

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Table 1
Examples of Educationally Purposeful Activities Offered in Chemistry and Biochemistry (2005-2013)

Participation in faculty-directed undergraduate research	• Undergraduate research with faculty • Student-faculty publication • Student research presentation (either poster or lecture) at professional meetings
Involvement in discipline-specific mentoring programs	• First-Year Chemistry Wizard Program • Student Mastery and Review for Standardized Tests (SMART) Program • MCAT boot camps • Science Solution Center Tutoring • Writing assistance from the faculty writing specialist
Active involvement in a professional or preprofessional organization	• Student-Affiliate American Chemical Society (ACS) Chapter • Huntingdon Rx: Pre-Pharmacy Club • Pre-Health Professions Club
Professional development	• Friday departmental seminars • Graduate school road trips • Trips to professional schools • Travel-study tours with faculty

Method

Data for this study were gathered from the Office of the Registrar, which collects and provides information about first-generation status for all students. In addition, our faculty routinely monitor academic information such as major, minor, entering composite ACT, high school GPA, and college GPA (i.e., semester, yearly, and final) for each of our majors. We also collect information about participation in 15 department-level EPAs designed to enhance student learning outcomes and success in the major.

For a group of 179 first-generation chemistry and biochemistry majors entering Huntingdon between 2005 and 2013 (mean of 19.9 first-year majors per year), students were categorized into one of three groups according to their composite ACT scores. The low-ability cohort consisted of students who entered college with an ACT score ranging from 17 to 21. Medium-ability students were identified as those scoring between 22 and 25 on the ACT, and high-ability students scored between 26 and 31. We plotted the first-year academic college GPA against the number of EPAs each student participated in at least once during the first year of college. In addition, we compiled information on the third-year and final GPAs of the first-generation college graduates in our program as a function of the number of EPAs each major participated in from 2005 to 2013.

Results and Discussion

As predicted by Kuh and colleagues (2006), our results suggest that student participation in EPAs during the first year has a conditional compensatory effect on the first-year GPA (Figure 1). That is, GPA is positively affected to a greater degree by engagement in EPAs for low-ability majors than for the other two cohorts. Despite a modest correlation ($r = 0.912$), students in the low-ability range improved their GPA 0.164 points for every EPA in which they were involved. This effect appeared most pronounced when this cohort of students was involved with at least three EPAs. In comparison, GPAs for the high-ability group only improved approximately 0.05 points for every EPA participated in.

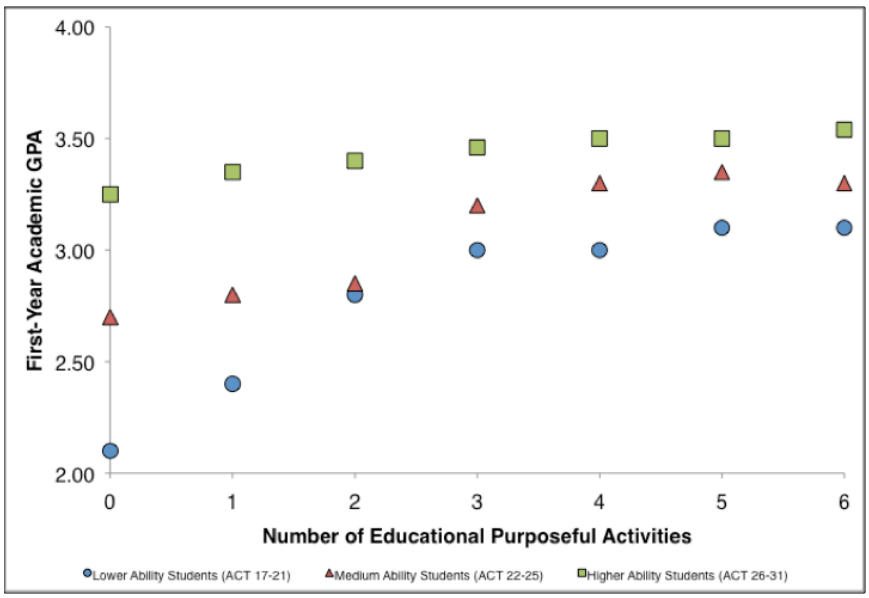

Figure 1. First-year academic GPA as a function of number of educationally purposeful activities for first-generation chemistry and biochemistry majors between 2005 and 2013 ($N = 179$).

Moderate involvement in EPAs may also have benefits for academic performance beyond the first year (Table 2). When compared to a control group of first-generation students in the major who did not engage in any EPAs, the low-ability students displayed a mean increase of 0.90 grade points in the first-year GPA, 0.76 in third-year GPA, and 0.74 in the final GPA, when engaging in three EPAs (on average). A similar, slightly less pronounced effect was observed in the GPAs of medium-ability students. High-ability students showed modest increases in GPAs as they became more involved with department level EPAs. However, in all cases, it appears that excessive involvement in EPAs had a minimal effect on GPA improvement.

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Table 2

Effect of Engagement in EPAs on First-Year, Third-Year, and Final GPA of First-Generation College Students Majoring in Chemistry or Biochemistry, 2005-2013

Mean number of EPAs Engaged	Composite ACT range	Number of students	Mean GPA		
			First-year	Third-year	Final
0	17-21	15	2.10	2.26	2.40
	22-25	15	2.70	2.75	2.70
	26-31	13	3.25	3.50	3.48
3	17-21	11	3.00	3.10	3.14
	22-25	14	3.40	3.54	3.50
	26-31	10	3.46	3.57	3.50
6	17-21	11	3.10	3.22	3.20
	22-25	10	3.30	3.45	3.40
	26-31	12	3.54	3.63	3.60

These findings underscore the importance of engagement in the first year of college, particularly for low-ability students. EPAs appeared to help chemistry and biochemistry majors at Huntingdon College establish baseline GPAs (i.e., a C student versus a B student), which could then be improved up to 0.3 grade points over the entire undergraduate career.

Conclusion

Although Carini and colleagues (2006) concluded that engagement helps improve student focus, we find that department-level EPAs help students better assimilate within any chosen field of study. In the chemistry and biochemistry programs at Huntingdon College, EPAs allow students to better understand the expectations of becoming a scientist en route to professional or personal goals. The deliberate inclusion of a variety of cocurricular, educationally purposeful activities, such as those identified here, would benefit first-generation college students or other at-risk students in any program.

Acknowledgement

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Dynamic Lecturing in First-Year Courses: Continuing a Proven Tradition

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While the current trend in higher education encourages instructors to move away from the lecture in favor of more active-learning strategies, research has shown that this traditional technique—the most commonly used in teaching—remains very effective (Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2013; Clark, Kirschner, & Sweller, 2012; Klahr & Nigam, 2004). Direct instruction or lectures are particularly important for first-year students (Clark et al., 2012), who need strong foundational knowledge to succeed at tasks required in less guided methods, such as group work. Moving to a group-based learning approach too soon can result in less, not more, learning (Baeten et al., 2013). Rather than abandoning the lecture in first-year classes, faculty can use the strategies described below to maximize its effectiveness.

Activate Prior Knowledge

It is easier to learn new information if some knowledge of the content already exists in long-term memory. When students attempt to learn something new, their long-term memory systems are activated and begin searching for relevant information to assist with processing the new content (Willingham, 2009).

To help students activate prior knowledge during a lecture, faculty can connect new information to content already learned. Asking students to recall a concept discussed in a previous semester or earlier in the current term before introducing the new related content can promote learning. For example, using a dusting-off-the-cobwebs exercise at the start of each class activates prior knowledge. Before the lecture begins, faculty can ask students to recall what they learned during the last class without looking at their notes first. Then, they can have them use their notes to fill in any gaps. Employing this simple classroom technique puts students' prior knowledge at the forefront of their memories, helping them grasp new content more easily (Goswami, 2008).

Emphasize Important Concepts

Unlike expert learners who rely on extensive background knowledge to distinguish between very important and less important information, new learners struggle to differentiate the two. Hrepic, Zollman, and Rebello (2003) found that these learners often focus on details rather than the big picture or most important points. Faculty can help redirect or focus students' attention on the points they want to stress by increasing voice volume for emphasis, repeating key points, using visual aids to highlight main ideas, and pausing to allow students to digest concepts. They may also consider using an image, a hand gesture, or another signal to emphasize a concept and increase the likelihood of students' retrieving the information later.

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Provide Brief Opportunities for Reflection

Prince (2004) recommended using a brief reflection activity approximately every 15 minutes during a class lecture, which can significantly increase information retention (Davis & Hult, 1997; Drabick, Weisberg, Paul, & Bubier, 2007). Such activities might include asking students to write a brief summary of what they learned during a lecture or having students compare notes for a few minutes several times throughout the lecture. In addition to written summaries and note-taking checks, faculty can ask students to engage in social activities during reflection periods, such as Turn and Talk or Think-Pair-Share. Turn and Talks allow a student to discuss course content one-on-one with a classmate, making the material interactive. Think-Pair-Share involves three steps. First, each student independently reflects on the course content (think); then, he or she discusses the content with one class member (pair); and finally, all students participate in a large group discussion on the topic (share).

Use Multimedia Effectively

Multisensory approaches, especially strategies incorporating visual images, contribute to significant learning (Goswami, 2008; Mayer, 2008), and faculty can use research-based techniques to create effective slides or other visual tools to promote student learning during lectures. Memory for images is much better than memory for words, often referred to as the picture superiority effect (Foos & Goolkasian, 2008), but faculty should select images carefully to ensure they are relevant to the content. Mayer (2008) concluded that faculty should rely only on essential images and words, eliminating all nonessential content that may distract the audience during a lecture. Organizing and integrating pictures and words and using larger fonts or arrows that draw attention to the most important content on slide presentations can increase learning. Finally, using conversational rather than formal language and allowing the audience time to read slides can also contribute to their effectiveness (Mayer, 2008).

Incorporate Retrieval Practice Opportunities

Testing is a powerful learning tool. Roediger and Karpicke (2006) identified this phenomenon, known as the testing effect, finding that students who studied material only once and tested themselves on the material three times outperformed students who studied the material four times and took one test approximately a week later. Researchers also have found that giving students multiple attempts at quizzes improves performance (Epstein, Epstein, & Brosvic, 2001).

Incorporating different kinds of quizzes throughout the lecture can give students opportunities to reflect on what they have learned. Quizzes can be incorporated into a PowerPoint presentation using technology (i.e., clickers or programs such as Poll Everywhere) or rely on more traditional methods, such as pen and paper or a show of hands. For longer or more extensive assessments, instructors may opt to test students online to conserve class

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time. Most course management systems, such as Blackboard, offer online testing options. Faculty can create their own quizzes or use publisher-provided test banks, uploading the questions into this computer-based testing format. Quizzes not only make memories much stronger (Roediger & Karpicke, 2006) but also provide faculty with feedback about their students' levels of understanding of concepts (Hogan, Rabinowitz, & Craven, 2003).

Conclusion

With multiple benefits, the lecture remains an effective teaching strategy, especially for first-year students who are building the foundations for learning that will carry them throughout their college careers. To develop dynamic lectures, faculty should activate prior knowledge before introducing new content, bring attention to the most important points, build in numerous reflection opportunities, use visual tools and multimedia effectively, and provide students with several opportunities to practice retrieving information they have learned. Incorporating these research-based techniques into the lecture maximizes learning.

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Other Resources

Visit www.drchristineharrington.org for video tutorials on Dynamic Lecturing.

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Moving Beyond the Checklist: Redesigning Orientation to Deliver Information When It Is Needed

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Barefoot and Gardner (1993) warned that providing information when it was not useful renders it useless. Yet higher education persists in a checklist approach to orientation and transition programs, delivering information to students, regardless of the timing, and then moving on to the next thing. Unfortunately, "when this process of providing information is done without intentionality or an eye toward integrated as well as comprehensive coverage, the impact of all of the valuable information is likely to be lost on an overwhelmed student" (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013, p. 45). To combat this problem, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater (UW-W), a four-year, mid-sized, public institution, redesigned its orientation process as part of a five-year plan to provide just-in-time information to first-year students, transfers, and their families.

Redesigning First-Year Orientation

In 2008, the First Year Experience Office restructured its first-year orientation programming with a single focus: Give new students information when they are most ready to receive it. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provided a framework identifying students' basic needs during their initial transition into higher education. Incorporating these themes, administrators at UW-W added a fourth phase to the existing three-stage orientation (Figure 1) — podcasts (currently known as FYE4U You Tube videos). The You Tube videos bridged the gap between Plan-It Purple, a one-day summer orientation in June, and arrival on campus in August for a two-day fall session—a time when students potentially would have little contact with the University. The podcasts focused on specific topics relevant to first-year students, such as Wish I Would Have Known; Eat, Sleep, and Live Purple; and Academic Jumpstart. A one-credit first-year seminar completed the orientation cycle. In 2013, UW-W launched its inaugural Facebook group for first-year and transfer students, giving them a convenient platform to ask questions or discuss concerns before the beginning of school.

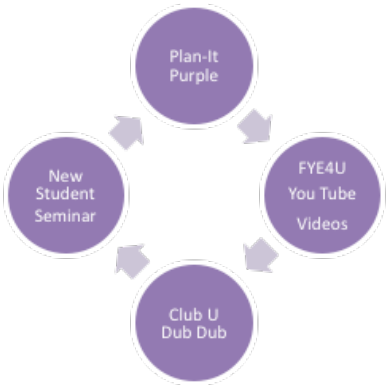

Figure 1. Four-phase model of first-year orientation at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

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Students participating in R U Purple!, the tradition-building event that includes painting Warhawk Drive purple. Photo courtesy of Craig Schreiner, UW-Whitewater.

In addition to new social media orientation experiences, UW-W administrators redesigned and rebranded two existing orientation programs. Warhawk Welcome, the fall orientation, became Club U Dub Dub, a two-day program held before the start of classes, which includes academic components, tradition-building activities, and community building. The program provides specific information students need at the beginning of their first year, and building affinity through connections and tradition with the institution improves retention to the second year (Soria, Lingren Clark, & Coffin Koch, 2013). In 2012, a task force was convened to review the effectiveness of the New Student Seminar, and an advisory board, composed of campus stakeholders and chaired by the director of First Year Experience, was created. The redesign of the course was a purposeful, research-based attempt to meet the needs of first-year students, incorporating timely dissemination of consistent, intentional information. Further, the course included updated learning outcomes, class plans, and supplemental course materials. A common syllabus debuted in fall 2014, along with a comprehensive assessment plan.

Making a TRANSFERmation

In 2010, UW-W redirected its focus to transfer students, a population that lacked services and resources despite a 78% retention rate (UW-System, 2011). Campus administrators surveyed all new transfer students before and after they attended an on-campus Plan-It Purple summer orientation and registration program. They unanimously voiced their preference to attend an on-campus orientation in the summer (versus an online option). Working with these data, UW-W created programs for transfer students and their guests. Students are divided into teams led by orientation student leaders, known as the Hawk-Squad, or meet with the adult student coordinator. Guests receive information about the First Year Experience, housing, meal plans, and billing. Campus officials also expanded the FYE4U You Tube videos to include all new students, not just first-year students.

UW-W recognized that transfers did not have the same access to fall orientation as first-year students. In response, they created TRANSFERmation, a two-day orientation specifically for transfers. Students can participate in all, some, or none of the events based on their needs. The program's schedule includes a campus tour, an information fair, tradition-building activities, award-winning speakers, and presentations. In fall 2013, UW-W offered its first New Student Seminar for transfer students. Because of high interest, two sections were offered in fall 2014.

> "Higher education persists in a checklist approach to orientation and transition programs, delivering information to students, regardless of timing, and then moving on to the next thing."

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Reaching Out to Families

With the redesigned student programs in place, UW-W shifted the focus to families. UW-W offers a highly-evaluated family schedule (independent of their student) during the summer Plan-It Purple program. Family Fest in October, which approximately 2,500 attend, includes carnival-style games and prizes, lunch, and a football game. In 2011, UW-W created Warhawk Send Off. Held in August, Warhawk Send Off provides information and an opportunity for first-year students and their families to connect with peers in their hometowns before the beginning of school. UW-W set a goal of 100 participants for the first event but welcomed 425 registrants. Now an annual program, Warhawk Send Off is held in Milwaukee and Middleton, and an Illinois location will be added in 2015.

Assessing Success

Students and family members complete program evaluations as part of a checkout process; therefore completion motivators do not skew the results. These evaluations have confirmed the success of UW-W's redesigned orientation program. In 2014, 91% of families (n = 1,359) agreed or strongly agreed they felt "more comfortable about sending my student to UW-Whitewater this fall because of my Plan-It Purple experience." Similarly, 98.6% of new first-year students (n = 1,002) and 96% of transfer students (n = 404) agreed or strongly agreed that participating in Plan-It Purple made them feel comfortable about returning to campus in the fall. Further, 97% of transfer students (n = 42) agreed or strongly agreed that activities during TRANSFERmation made them feel welcome at UW-W, and 90% agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped them make an easier transition to the campus.

In spring 2014, the staff began the next phase of the strategic planning process, updating the vision, mission, goals, learning outcomes, measures, and criterion for success. With these plans in place, another journey will begin to include assessment of learning, and more changes are likely. Continued assessment and research review will guide the next five years of transition programs at UW-W.

Conclusion

The overall goal of UW-W's redesigned orientation program was to meet the ever-changing needs of students and families more effectively. Expanding and fine-tuning orientation is possible for any institution, though many may wonder when is the best time to make such a change. At UW-W, two events prompted redesign—changing the name New Student Programs to First Year Experience and hiring a new assistant dean. The focus of the transition program became all new students—transfer, international, nontraditional, and traditional—and the direction shifted to include a full year of services and programs rather than just the first semester. The redesign process may seem daunting, but with a plan, support, and leadership, it is definitely attainable.

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The Student-Faculty Connection: Establishing Relationships in the First-Year Seminar

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Most instructors in first-year seminars have a strong desire to help their students become successful, lifelong learners, but many fail to connect with them meaningfully in the classroom. This disconnect can extend beyond the instructor to coursework and ultimately to the institution. Mounting evidence has shown that student-instructor interaction can affect retention and persistence (ACT Institution Data File, 2013), and many students cite developing a strong connection to an instructor as one of the main reasons they continue in school (Tinto, 1993). The keys to developing relationships in the first-year seminar are providing strategic instruction that offers opportunities for faculty to relate to students and shifting the focus from teachers and content to learners and the learning process (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Cuseo (2012) identified five learning processes that support the development of positive student-faculty interaction, including

1. incorporating mixed media, visuals, hands-on learning, articles on a current topic, and small-group followed by whole-class discussions into the course;
2. providing opportunities for social interactions among students, faculty, and staff;
3. involving students in personal assessments and reflections on behaviors that produce academic success;
4. exploring the purpose of a college education and its connection to future goals; and
5. validating students' personal experience.

Drawing on these principles, this article describes a series of strategies instructors can use to build connections with students in the first-year seminar. While the focus here is a particular type of course, these strategies are highly portable and adaptable to a wide range of first-year classes.

First Impressions

The first day of class is perhaps the most overlooked of the semester and, more often than not, a missed opportunity to help students connect with one another, the instructor, and the course. Most instructors rely on the syllabus and class calendar to get them through the period and then announce early dismissal. This information is meaningful but usually not very engaging for first-year students, who want to know whether their instructors, peers, and classes are going to provide an environment in which they will feel comfortable and want to return (Erickson & Strommer, 1991).

Warm-up activities or short icebreakers can help students start making connections on the first day, creating community and enthusiasm, establishing a student-instructor relationship from the beginning, and giving students a greater appreciation for the syllabus and course (Cuseo, 2012). One icebreaker follows a speed-dating format. First, students brainstorm

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questions they want to ask someone they are meeting for the first time. Then, for one minute, each student asks those questions of the person across from him or her. After one minute, each student rotates to a new partner. When the interviews are complete, students begin the rotation for a final round, this time asking a deeper question: "Why are you here in college?" By the end of class, students have connected with one another and quickly overcome social barriers. Instructors also can share their answers to the same questions, giving the class a sense of their personalities, thus humanizing them, and making them more approachable.

Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning gives students opportunities to connect with academic material through others' perspectives and allows them to begin socializing in small groups, especially important for minority populations and students with lower levels of achievement (Wasley, 2006). Not just group work, cooperative learning encourages both positive interdependence—an all-for-one-and-one-for-all mentality—and individual accountability. Each participant is responsible for the overall results, which necessitates social connections to ensure ultimate success. Moreover, it affords the instructor the opportunity to engage in meaningful, thoughtful, evaluative conversation with a few students at a time, promoting personal connections regardless of the class size (Millis, 2010). In other words, movement around the classroom begins to break down the barriers of separation, real or perceived, that can occur when instructors remain tied to a podium.

To engage students in cooperative learning, instructors might assign a few open-ended questions about current issues or topics in the course that lend themselves well to multiple perspectives, asking students to respond to the questions in small groups and then present their deliberations to the class as a whole. During this time, the instructor can engage group members one-on-one, creating an opportunity to build trust and hear their perspectives. Instructors might also share overlooked perspectives, adding to the depth and interaction, ultimately, leading to an atmosphere of learning and connectedness in the classroom that can easily spill into office hours and beyond.

Career Exploration

Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that students need a sense of "belongingness and connectedness to the persons, group, or culture disseminating a goal" (p. 64), which they refer to as *relatedness*. When this relatedness occurs, students can then adopt those extrinsic goals, such as academic success or completing general education courses, as their own. Since first-year students often identify career success as a major reason for attending college (Sax, 1998), degree planning and career exploration activities offer instructors prime opportunities to connect with students on a personal level by finding out more about students' interests, values, and beliefs. Without a clear degree plan or career in mind that is aligned with their interests, students often do not see the direct value of their coursework. Emphasizing major and career exploration in the first-year seminar allows instructors to relate with students based on choices that are very personal to them, deepening the connections made.

> "Career exploration activities provide an opportunity for instructors to have personal conversations with students about their future plans, strengthening their sense of connection to the institution and its goals."

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One very simple but effective tool in this area is using a career interest survey, such as Focus II, where students can navigate and complete surveys while accessing other career resources. It is an especially great place to start assessing a student's interests and how those interests connect to possible majors and careers. Career exploration activities provide an opportunity for instructors to have personal conversations with students about their future plans, strengthening their sense of connection to the institution and its goals. Finally, asking students to write a short reflective essay related to their discoveries in this area can help turn nebulous goals that do not relate to the "here and now" into more concrete ones.

Conclusion

First-year seminars are frequently adopted as retention initiatives, but their effectiveness may be tied more to the meaningful connections instructors are able to establish with students than to the course itself. Focusing on the learner and the learning process in the classroom becomes the vehicle for establishing important student-faculty relationships. Here, we have reviewed first-day icebreakers, collaborative learning activities, and career exploration as ways to build effective student-faculty interactions. These and other strategies suggested by Cuseo's (2012) five principles are easily adapted to classes beyond the first-year seminar and even the first college year.

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Research Spotlight: National Survey Examines the Depth of Peer Leader Involvement on Campus

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Nineteenth century French philosopher Joseph Joubert is credited with stating, "To teach is to learn twice" (quoted in Whitman, 1988, p. 1). As students engage in peer leadership opportunities, they undoubtedly benefit from the experiences. Yet, Astin (1999) proposed, "the amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program" (p. 519). This leads us to question what we know about the depth of peer leaders' involvement and the outcomes associated with it.

To explore this question, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition conducted the 2013 National Survey of Peer Leaders (NSPL). The Center developed and administered the survey in collaboration with four other national organizations: the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I); the Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education (NODA); the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA); and the International Center for Supplemental Instruction. A total of 4,932 respondents from 49 four-year institutions in the United States participated in the survey, of whom 4,269 (i.e., the survey sample) reported a current or previous peer leadership experience.

How Involved Are Peer Leaders?

One measure of the depth of involvement is the number of times a student engages in an experience. The NSPL results paint a varied picture of the amount and length of students' leadership involvement. The majority (54.0%) of survey participants reported holding one or two peer leader positions at one time, suggesting a measured approach to engagement (Figure 1). Similarly, the largest group of peer leaders (55.9%) participated in between one and three peer leadership positions during their collegiate experience (Figure 2).

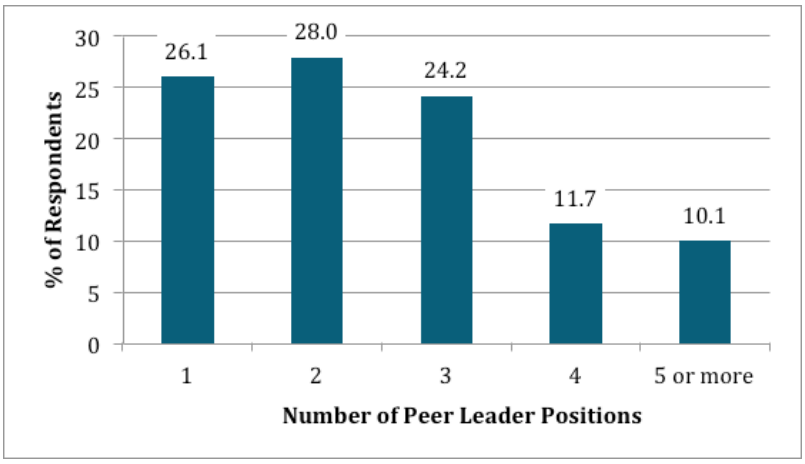

Figure 1. Highest number of peer leader positions held at one time (n = 4,016).

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Moreover, a sizeable group of students (21.8%) demonstrated binge involvement—four or more peer leadership positions at one time (Figure 1)— with approximately 20% of students participating in six or more total experiences in their college careers (Figure 2). To put these numbers in perspective, students, who typically enter leadership roles in their second year, would need to participate in at least two experiences a year during their sophomore, junior, and senior years to achieve six total experiences, and between three and four opportunities yearly to reach 10 or more.

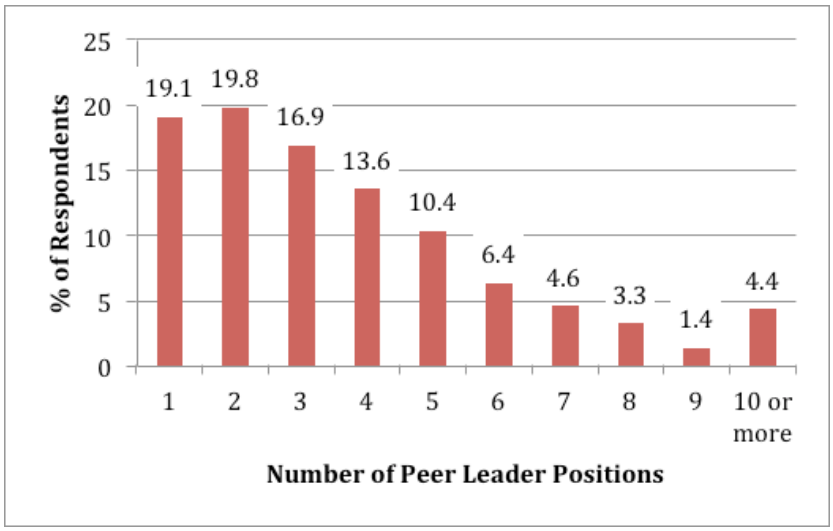

Figure 2. Total number of peer leader positions held during college (n = 4,016).

The amount of time spent performing peer leader duties shows patterns similar to students' overall involvement (Figure 3). The majority (67.3%) of survey participants spent fewer than 16 hours per week performing responsibilities connected to their peer leader roles. Conversely, 32.7% spent greater than 16 hours a week fulfilling their duties, with 2.7% working 40 hours or more in their leadership positions.

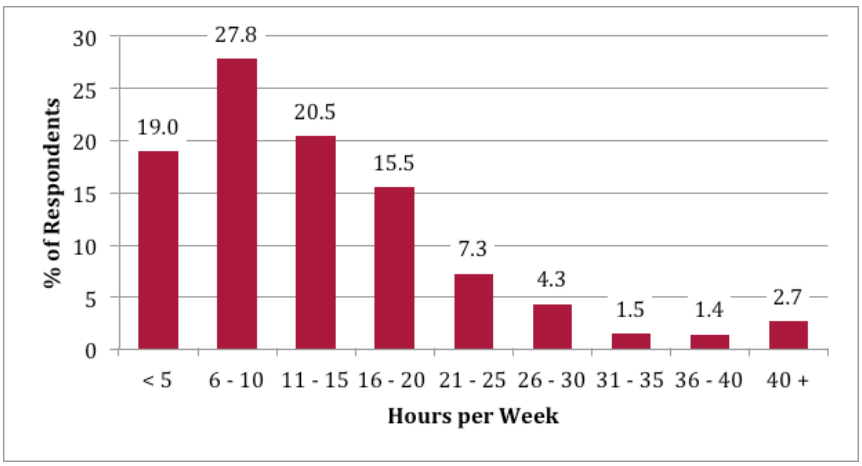

Figure 3. Average number of hours spent per week on peer leadership responsibilities (n = 4,016).

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Discussion

The NSPL results suggest that peer leadership experiences are high-involvement propositions. Researchers (Astin, 1993; Ender & Kay, 2001; Russel & Skinkle, 1990) have reported that high levels of involvement have resulted in enhanced student development in a number of areas, including communication and leadership skills; integrative and applied learning; knowledge of campus resources; interaction with faculty, staff, and peers; critical thinking; problem solving; the ability to work under pressure; and interpersonal skills. Additionally, students who serve as peer leaders have demonstrated increases in factual knowledge, helping others, friendships, personal growth, positive regard for instructor skills, and decision making (Bandura, Millard, Johnson, Stewart, & Bartolomei, 2003).

However, time-on-task alone is not enough to account for these improved outcomes. Further investigation into the quality of peer leaders' involvement, as well as the connection of an experience to student development, is necessary. Future analyses of the 2013 NSLP data will provide insight into the influence and benefits of peer leader training, supervision, and mentoring on outcomes associated with the experience. For more information on the National Survey of Peer Leaders, please visit http://www.sc.edu/fye/research/survey_cycle.

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