

Advising first-year students

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Resources regarding Advising First-Year Students

Improving the Odds for Freshman Success

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The first year of college is trying for many students; new responsibilities and expectations can be overwhelming. For this reason a large percentage of students do not make it to their sophomore year. Gardner and Siegel (2001) cite data gathered by ACT indicating that 28% of students in public four year institutions fail to continue beyond their first year in college. Because of this, and other factors, interventions targeted to first-year students have become important. Many institutions have adopted programs designed to provide a 'rite of passage' in which students are welcomed, supported, celebrated, and eventually assimilated into the campus (Gardner, 1986).

Theories That Help

Understanding the development of matriculating students is essential to those seeking to make a difference in these students' lives. Vincent Tinto (1993) outlined three stages students move through: separation, transition and incorporation. Students first go through a separation stage in which they move away from their home environment. Although this can be quite traumatic for students, most eventually are able to move to the second stage, transition. During this stage students are torn between their old environment and the new one; they may not feel they belong in their old environments but have yet to find their places in the new one. Finally students move into incorporation when they have achieved full membership into the social and academic communities of the institution.

Upcraft (1995) noted another common student development theory attributed to Scholssberg, Lynch and Chickering. This theory concentrates on students' needs to feel they matter and are appreciated. College personnel must realize that students need support from peers, faculty, staff, and family if they are to succeed. Support networks must be in place so freshman can begin to make the important connections that will help them cope.

A final theory of importance is Astin's Involvement Theory. Astin (1985) emphasized that students learn and develop when they become active in the collegiate experience. Upcraft (1995) expanded on this theory when he stated 'The greater the quantity and quality of involvement, the more likely the student will succeed in college' (p.18). College personnel can help students become active in a number of ways; two successful strategies are an activities carnival at the beginning of the year that introduces students to different campus organizations, and scheduling freshman planning conferences between students and their advisors.

Historical Perspective for Supporting First-Year Students

The academy has known for over a century that first-year students face unique challenges. Boston College pioneered the first Freshman Orientation class in 1888 (Gardner, 1986). Reed College (Portland, OR) became the first institution to schedule an orientation course for credit when, in 1911, they offered a course separated into men-only and women-only sections that met 2 hours per week for the year (Gardner, 1986).

Orientation classes acquired their modern form in 1972 when, after a series of campus riots then University of South Carolina President, Thomas Jones asked faculty to develop innovative ways to rethink undergraduate education. Jones' goal was to help students appreciate the university and not destroy it (Schroeder, 2003). History professor John Gardner helped develop what eventually became known as the First-Year Experience, or FYE (Schroeder, 2003). Gardner, in an interview with Schroeder (2003), defined FYE as 'a national and international effort to improve the first-year, the total experience of students - and to do this intentionally and by rethinking the way the first-year was organized and executed' (p. 10).

As competition for students increased during the last quarter of the 20th Century, institutions turned their focus on the needs of entering students in an effort to make their institutions more appealing. The popularity of programs targeting the first-year students soared. Gardner (1986) illuminated factors that influence the success or failure of first-year programs. For instance, altruism is of particular importance to the effectiveness of a program; faculty and staff must share a genuine concern for new students.

In today's climate of declining revenues and higher enrollment standards, institutions must exert extra efforts to keep the students they have worked so hard to recruit (Gardner, 1986). Many colleges and universities are aware of the changing nature of the term 'freshman' as the number of nontraditional, older, married, and working students continues to increase. Successful institutions realize that systems must be in place to address the needs of students who differ markedly from the traditional residential freshman. So too must institutions have programs that address the growing number of recent high school graduates who enter with poor academic foundations. Finally, institutions must educate these entering students regarding their rights and obligations in today's college environment.

Gardner (1986) highlighted the importance of programs that focus on the first few weeks of college when many students make the decision to drop-out. During this period students feel increased personal independence and form the habits and relationships they will carry throughout their college careers. Gardner (2001) also noted that during this time students make judgments about faculty and their major, although the latter is apt to change. He (1986) further suggested that a number of actions can improve the freshman year including curriculum modifications, enhanced academic advisement, faculty (instead of graduate student) teaching freshmen level courses, extended/continuing orientation, living/learning environments, peer counseling, and special freshmen administrative units.

Over the years, an organized transition program has become a cornerstone of the new student experiences at campuses across the country. When Gardner (1986) found that freshmen who complete orientation courses were retained at a higher rate than those who did not take such a course, the demand for first-year services led to the establishment of a National Resource Center based at the University of South Carolina. By 1995, Gardner (2001) noted that 82% of participating institutions reported a significant focus on the first-year experience. In 2005 the 24th annual FYE conference drew over 1200

administrators, faculty and students and The National Resource Center for First-Year Experience & Students in Transition produced many publications including a monograph series and a bi-annual journal, The Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.

In October, 1999, The Policy Center on the First Year of College (FYI) was initiated at Brevard College in North Carolina. The Policy Center, now known as the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, was developed as an extension of the National Resource Center ; Policy Center staff work cooperatively with the National Resource Center on the issues of concern for first-year students especially first-year assessment procedures.

Components of successful transition programs

Betsy O. Barefoot (2000) outlined a number of objectives needed for a successful first-year transition program. Key are student-to-student interactions and student-to-faculty interactions. Barefoot found that student time and involvement on campus outside of class must increase, and a link between the curriculum and co-curriculum areas should be established. Academic engagement and student expectations should increase. Programs must be established that assist students who enter with insufficient academic preparation. Institutions must set clearly defined objectives as an important first step in the establishment of a program that will benefit both students and the institution.

Once objectives have been established, interventions must be implemented that define a transition program. The cornerstone of most programs is the first-year seminar course designed to introduce students to the college experience and teach them how to master it (Gardner, 2001). The classroom experience is increasingly important since so many of today's first-year students are nontraditional and live off campus; thus, they are less likely to have contact with student affairs offices or residence halls. For these students the seminar class becomes their main source of connection to campus (Schroeder, 2003). Skills covered in a typical seminar course include time management, orientation to campus facilities, drug/alcohol awareness, responsible sexual behavior, and the importance of diversity (Gardner, 2001). Some other areas that may be covered, such as computer and library skills, can serve an immediate need as well as lay the foundation for student survival throughout their college careers (Franklin, Cranston, Perry, Purtle, 2002). Franklin, et al (2002) also indicated that students who completed a seminar class scored consistently higher than a control group in areas such as student development and integration to campus culture. These students also were more likely to take advantage of academic support services.

The establishment of learning communities is another effective first-year intervention. Communities often consist of thematically linked courses with a group of students in common. Students within a learning community establish a vital support network of people who share their same classroom experiences. Learning communities can be extended into residence halls where these students live on the same floor and have common homework and study time (Gardner, 2001).

Many campuses encourage civic engagement through the inclusion of service learning opportunities within their transition programs. Not only does service learning contribute to the community, it provides students with an inherently active and relevant experience that promotes interest in the class and the material. In many instances members of the community serve as teachers and evaluators (Gardner, 2001). Projects such as Habitat for Humanity, food banks, and adopt-a-highway have dramatic effects on the community

and are great ways to get students involved.

Health Education is another crucial element included in most first-year programs. Today's students face a myriad of health issues e.g., STDs, sexual assault, eating disorders and binge drinking. These health issues often have a disproportionate effect on first-year students as they seek a niche within the campus culture (Gardner, 2001). Students need to be aware of health services offered on campus and know how to access them.

Academic support services must be established to help first-year students. These can include such services as writing centers, math labs, tutoring, non-traditional student programs, technology-support, counseling, and support services for students with learning disabilities. Gardner(2001) noted that institutional commitment for these services can result in higher retention and greater academic achievement. Here upperclassmen can serve as mentors and positive influences; Gardner(2001) observed that organized programs where upperclassmen serve such roles as peer mentors/advisors, tutors, and course assistants bring positive benefits.

Implications for Academic Advising

Academic advising plays a key role in the success of students as they transition to our institutions. Tinto (1999) suggested that advising is integral to student development. Advisors must understand the informational, conceptual, and relational aspects of their roles and how these aspects affect their interactions with first-year students.

Academic advisors should possess a clear understanding of the students on their campuses. Today's transitioning student may belong to a variety of sub-groups or 'special populations'. Special populations that often include a large number of students are: students with disabilities, adult learners, at-risk students, students from differing cultures, and students in the Millennial Generation. Advisors should keep abreast of the latest information regarding advising these population groups; information regarding these populations can be found within the NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources.

The advising of one special population group deserves focused attention; today's traditional-age student represents a new generation of college students known as the Millennial Generation. As defined by Keeling (2003), millennial students are those born between 1982 and 2003. Although many of these students have been protected by parents and society, as a rule they are driven to improve the world, have a positive attitude, and are team players. Advisors should understand and be prepared to handle issues common to this group.

Keeling (2003) notes that millennial students often have lofty goals and high expectations but often lack realistic plans for achieving their goals. Advisors must be prepared to help these students achieve a full understanding of how their educational and career goals align. Advisors should ask guiding questions to determine students' strengths and interests as well as what will make them happy. While institutionally based career development services may be available on many campuses, to be effective, advisors need a thorough understanding of different career development theories e.g., Holland, Super, Myers-Briggs, etc., and how to use and interpret different inventories and tools. Advisors who use these tools effectively can steer students toward appropriate career paths.

Millennial students often matriculate from highly structured elementary and secondary school systems that may place a higher value on conformity than on critical thinking and decision making skills. Students who lack of experiences in these areas can pose a particular challenge for advisors since they need more guidance in choosing a major or career path (Keeling, 2003). Advisors need many tools at their disposal to help these students with decisions e.g., decision-making templates (see Clearinghouse critical thinking/academic support resources), handouts explaining campus majors, degree requirement sheets, and department contact information.

Often millennial students find the pressures of their first - year daunting. This can lead to extreme stress, depression, and, in some cases, student engagement in risky behaviors. Advisors should be aware of warning signs and know how to refer students to appropriate resources (Keeling, 2003).

Parental involvement in the daily campus life of millennial students exceeds that of any previous generation. It is important that advisors understand the implications of this involvement. Advisors should expect that parents will be present at orientation, may ask to participate in student advising appointments, and make phone calls to advisors. Keeling (2003) notes that advisors must be familiar with confidentiality matters such as FERPA).

While each campus meets parental needs in different ways, most seek to fulfill parental requirements for information while guarding student privacy. Some campuses have parent newsletters that detail expected student experiences during the first year. Others provide parents with questions they should ask their student and/or dates when students should receive mid-term grades. Still others have established Web sites designed for parents (Keeling, 2003). Links to sample parent resources can be found in the Clearinghouse.

Conclusion

In the past thirty years significant efforts have been made to improve the experiences of students transitioning to our campuses. A variety of campus programs have been developed to meet the unique needs of these students and most importantly, help them become successful students. Advisors, in particular, must understand the issues facing today's students if we are to help them make a smooth transition to our institutions and become successful.

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 - **Advising** within a first-year course
 - Academic Advising Today articles (search within *the AAT* site)
 - Preparing to advise first-year students
 - Vantage Point: An Important Tool for Advising at Research Universities
 - What Millennial First Year Students Want and Need from Academic Advisors
 - **Read more about it!** *Academic advising: New insights for teaching and learning in the first year* NACADA Monograph - M14 within the NACADA Store

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