Support services for students with autism spectrum disorder in higher education

Deanna L Keith, Dr.
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Support Services for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Higher Education

Bunnie Claxton, Russ Claxton, Deanna Keith, and Russ Yocum

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to identify the factors that impact learners with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in a postsecondary setting. The central research question is: What factors of the disability support services offices impact learning in university students with ASD? The subquestions include: (a) How do students with ASD describe their experiences with the University’s disability support services offices? (b) How do University faculty describe their role in supporting students with ASD? (c) What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as having a positive impact on student learning? (d) What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as lacking or ineffective? This single case study included six student participants with autism spectrum disorder and four disability support services office faculty members from the University. Data were collected via individual interviews, an online focus group, and documents/archival records. Data analysis consisted of categorical aggregation, development of naturalistic generalizations, and development of themes.

Statement of Originality

The current research has been the basis of a presentation and poster, but it has not been published elsewhere and it has not been submitted simultaneously for publication elsewhere.

Overview

Due, in part, to accommodations through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), many students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have demonstrated greater achievement at the secondary school level and have expressed a desire to pursue higher education (Roberts, 2010). Increasing numbers of students with ASD are enrolling in higher education learning programs (Gelbar, Shefcyk, & Reichow, 2015). Since an increasing number of students with ASD are pursuing higher education, it is important for university faculty and staff to understand the systems necessary to help this student population successfully transition into the postsecondary setting, and to retain these students through
program completion. Therefore, this study focused on factors that impact learning for students with ASD in higher education.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify factors that impact learners with ASD in a university setting. Exploring the perceptions of students with ASD and support services faculty is crucial to gaining a comprehensive understanding of what factors impact learners with ASD in higher education. A case study design was utilized because it allowed investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within a real world setting (Yin, 2014).

**Background**

According to the United States Department of Education (USDE, 2016), enrollment in higher education among students with disabilities has increased considerably. For example, since 1978, the percentage of college freshman reporting disabilities has tripled (USDE, 2016). Additionally, diagnosis of ASD has increased (Gelbar et al., 2015; Herbert et al., 2014). The latest findings report that one in 68 children are diagnosed with ASD annually (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Researchers report that an increase in diagnosis will likely lead to an increase in the number of students with ASD enrolled in higher education (Armstrong, 2011; Matthews, Ly, & Goldberg, 2015). However, an understanding of the factors that impact learners with ASD through a university’s disability support services has not been thoroughly researched. Therefore, further research was warranted and sought to provide insight to better support students with ASD in higher education.

Wei et al. (2014) reported that many variables contribute to the success or failure of obtaining a college degree and further contended that more research is needed to fill this gap. Troiano, Liefield, and Trachtenberg (2010) reported that students may not be prepared for the level of self-control, diligence, self-evaluation, decision-making, and goal setting required for success in college. The problem is that learning opportunities are hindered in higher education for students with ASD because students with ASD are characterized by cognitive and social deficits (Matthews et al., 2015; Volkmar, Reichow, & McPartland, 2014; Wehmeyer & Shogren, 2013).

**Review of Literature**

As diagnosis and higher education enrollment for students with ASD increases, so does the demand for effective support services. Upon entering postsecondary education, the students’ rights and responsibilities change considerably from that in the high school setting. IDEA guarantees a free and appropriate education in the K-12 setting in the least restrictive environment, and schools are legally accountable for identifying students’ needs, determining modification and accommodations, and implementing a specific Individual Education Plan (IEP). However, the legal aspects of disability shift to the Americans with Disabilities
Act (ADA) of 1990, ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which emphasize educational access (Thomas, 2000). In order to obtain support and services, postsecondary students must pursue services by self-identifying as a student with a disability to the disability support services offices. Documentation of the disability is then submitted along with a request for accommodations. Universities do not alter coursework or degree requirements, but they enlist the disability support services offices to ensure barriers are removed in order to offer equal opportunity for students with ASD to participate in postsecondary educational opportunities (Thomas, 2000, pp. 248-257).

Though students may have received certain accommodations through IEPs in high school, this does not necessarily indicate eligibility at the university level. However, students may self-initiate some of these accommodations by serving as a proactive self-advocate. For example, a student whose IEP accommodation included preferential front row seating may be expected to arrive early to secure a preferred seat in a college classroom (Ackles et al., 2014). Many students with ASD require unique and customized accommodations and may have received them throughout high school. However, “while institutions of higher education have developed pathways and supports to meet ADA requirements for students with disabilities, some of the unique supports typically needed by students with ASD are often not addressed within the traditional accommodations or college support services framework” (Ackles et al., 2014, p. 7).

**Transitions**

ASD is a lifelong developmental disability that affects an individual’s ability to make sense of the world, process information, and relate to other people (NAS, 2014). Since autism is a spectrum disorder, individuals’ abilities are impacted in different ways and in varying degrees. Some individuals have significant learning disabilities and require high degrees of support while others are high functioning and require little academic support. Though often high-functioning academically, individuals with ASD are still likely to experience communication and social challenges. Transitioning from the supportive environment of high school to the challenging expectations of being an independent learner in postsecondary education can be challenging for the student with ASD (Rydzewska, 2012). “There are expectations of increased independence, greater demands for self-directed learning, self-management of time, and less structured timetables, as well as new peer groups and social situations” (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014, p. 152).

Students transitioning from high school to college need to be prepared for the multitude of changes that occur upon graduation. However, little is known about the types of high school to college transition and orientation policies and interventions that may lead to increased enrollment rates and retention. The literature reveals a disconnection between the transition planning process in high school and the support services offered at universities. Research specifically focusing on the transition from high school to postsecondary education for
students with ASD is limited (Schindler, Cajiga, Aaronson, & Salas, 2015) and thus warrants further investigation.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research question: What factors of the disability support services offices impact learning in university students with ASD? Subquestions of the study are as follows:

1. How do students with ASD describe their experiences with the University’s disability support services offices department?
2. How do University faculty describe their role in supporting students with ASD?
3. What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as having a positive impact on student learning?
4. What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as lacking, ineffective, or limiting to the student with ASD?

Setting, Participants, and Procedures

Setting

The setting for this single case study was the disability support services offices of a large university on the east coast. The University offers over 545 programs of study in both an online and residential format. Residential enrollment exceeds 15,000 students. Males represent 41% of the student body while females represent 59%. All 50 states and 85 countries are represented at the University. The University is accredited and awards associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s, specialist’s, and doctoral degrees. The disability support services offices at the University serve over 600 residential students with at least one identified disability, and over 400 students enrolled in an online program.

Participants

This qualitative study included six student and four faculty participants. Student participants were required to be residential students 18 years of age or older. In order to qualify, student participants had to satisfy one of the following conditions: a) currently attending the University, b) dropped out of the University within the last year, or c) dropped out and then returned to the University. Students that transferred from another university could participate, but only if they had completed a minimum of one full semester at the University. Five student participants were female and one was male. Females were disproportionately represented as compared to ASD diagnosis.

Student participants were determined through purposeful sampling via an
emailed questionnaire (Creswell, 2013) sent from the disability support services offices. Respondents were purposefully chosen based on students with ASD currently enrolled in the University or enrolled in the University within the last year. Self-reported ASD candidates were considered for participation in the study; however, a sufficient number of officially diagnosed candidates responded and, therefore, received priority. Faculty participants were chosen based on current employment at the University in the disability support services offices or in association with the disability support services offices (e.g. employees of assistive technology department, testing center, or hearing or blind services).

Student participant solicitation required a faculty member generated email to all potential participants to ensure confidentiality. Respondents then took the online survey at www.surveymonkey.com for purposeful sampling. The public directory of employees at the University served to identify four faculty participants. Student and faculty participants were limited to those with firsthand experiences with the disability support services offices. As with student participants, faculty participants were interviewed. Interviewing faculty participants provided a different perspective on support services and revealed information unknown to student participants. All participants engaged in the same online focus group at www.classchatter.com. Faculty interviews and the online focus group also corroborated some student data as themes developed, which increased trustworthiness. A concerted effort was made to accommodate each participant’s time and schedule since an inquiry can present a burden to a participant (Stake, 1995).

Procedures

Once both student and faculty participants were secured, each participant was interviewed in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. Students were asked 14 pre-determined questions, while faculty were asked 11. Participants were then asked to participate in an online focus group and were provided an additional nine questions. All interviews were video and audio recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews in order to ensure accuracy during transcription. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Because the online focus group was conducted using text as the communication medium, participants’ responses were accurately and automatically recorded.

Data analysis included identifying and developing patterns, themes, and content analysis. Data collection and recording included the use of memoing, bracketing, open coding, enumeration, and member checking to identify themes throughout the data collecting process. Office of Disability Support Services policies and procedures documents, job descriptions, and applications were also reviewed to provide triangulation of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).
Findings

The findings of the study will address both the central question, and the four sub-questions used to guide the study. The central question of the study was: What factors of the disability support services offices impact learning in University students with ASD? The data were analyzed to identify recurring code words, and then the code words were extracted and grouped into common themes. The results of the study revealed the following five themes:

1. Factors based on Accommodations - Most of these comments had to do with academic support such as test-taking options, tutoring, note-taking assistance, and extended time for assignments.
2. Factors based on Accountability - Participants identified the importance of someone helping to hold the students accountable for completing tasks and meeting deadlines.
3. Factors based on Compassion and Individuality - Participants mentioned the importance of students with ASD having someone who cares and understands their challenges, and treats them as an individual.
4. Factors based on Professors - How students with ASD are treated by their professors can have a significant impact on their success. Furthermore, a professor’s actions and perceived attitude toward accommodations and assistance can be very important to the student.
5. Social Factors - The need for social opportunities, social support, and assistance with appropriate relationship building and conflict resolution was a common theme throughout.

Frequency of the code words used to develop these five themes is indicated in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Code Word</th>
<th>Occurrences Across Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutor</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quiet Environment</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quizzes/Exam/Test</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Request</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extended Time</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The subquestions of the study allowed the participants to describe their personal experiences in more detail and are as follows:

1. **How do students with ASD describe their experience with the University’s disability support offices?**

   In general, the students were very positive about the support services provided by the University. Although they appreciated the academic support provided, several of them stated that they wish the university
provided more social and emotional support. One student stated that she was annoyed by how much emphasis was placed on testing and tutoring when what she really needs is social skills. Conversely, one student suggested that her success was not the University’s responsibility and stated, “People are born into situations that they can overcome.” One student stated that she thought services were underutilized because not all students with ASD sought services. She added that she knew several students with ASD who did not seek services because of the perceived stigma attached to receiving services, but her view was that it was no different than going to the doctor if you have an injury.

2. How do university faculty describe their role in supporting students with ASD?

Answers to this question revealed that although faculty believed that the services provided by the University were beneficial to students with ASD, there were many needs faculty and staff were unable to meet. For example, one employee felt that providing a quiet, calm, and distraction-free testing environment was beneficial to the students academically, but was concerned that the students’ social and emotional needs were not being met, and even suggested that services should be extended to the students’ home life. Another employee focused on policy issues and ensuring that they met all legal and ethical requirements. Faculty members mentioned that they often serve as liaisons between students and other faculty. Although all of the employees seemed to have an awareness of the limits of the services that are provided, they all emphasized the importance of letting the students know that they care about them as individuals. It was also noted that some students with ASD need encouragement because they do not always believe or realize that they can experience success in college.

3. What factors of disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as having a positive impact on student learning?

Both groups mentioned testing accommodations as being a beneficial academic service. One-on-one assistance such as tutoring or note-taking assistance was also mentioned. One student who was close to graduation mentioned that he wished he had been aware of all of the services offered earlier in his college career. Another mentioned the benefit of the one-on-one connection with support services faculty. Almost all participants mentioned the benefit of having a caring and supportive environment. They all wanted to be treated as individuals and feel that their voices are being heard.

4. What factors of the disability support services offices are perceived by students and faculty as lacking, ineffective, or as limiting to the student
Although both students and faculty described the office of disability services in a positive light, all participants indicated that there was significant room for improvement. Both students and faculty mentioned the need for the University to provide more support for students with ASD, while the faculty defined many of the financial, personnel, and overall limited resources as being some of the most significant challenges. One faculty member mentioned that although there is a need for more support of students with ASD, the office is also trying to meet the needs of close to 1000 total students with various other disabilities and needs. Another faculty member addressed the importance of being able to steer students in the right direction when the office was unable to meet a need or provide a requested service. Students mentioned a desire for additional services, but also emphasized that better communication regarding the services currently offered would be beneficial.

Almost every participant in the study emphasized the lack of, and need for, social and emotional support in addition to academic support. One student stated that he felt capable academically, but his inability to deal with roommates, and their lack of understanding about his disability, made it almost impossible to live in the dorms. Another student stated that she was in gifted classes in high school and that her test scores were “off the charts,” and that almost all of her challenges were social or emotional. Although the participants were not confident in defining how these social needs could be met by the university, they did provide some general suggestions. Some of the student suggestions included more casual communication such as text messages, organized socials, providing “panic rooms,” or allowing therapy pets in the dorms.

Another area that several participants mentioned as lacking was assistance in coping with stress. One student mentioned that the fear of classroom presentations, or even working in a group setting, caused them to panic and often avoid going to class. Another student mentioned that the self-advocacy required, such as the process of seeking test accommodations, just added to the test anxiety she was already experiencing.

Summary

The findings of this study provided five themes to assist in identifying factors that impact learning for students with ASD. Of the five themes, accommodations and social supports were most notable. Accommodations, whether provided or lacking, impacted outcomes in the form of grades, even to the point of failure. Although individual accommodations such as test taking or lecture notes may be provided, there is little assistance for significant classroom challenges such as
fear of group work or class presentations. Recognizing that all students with ASD have unique accommodation needs is critical for success, as provision of specific supports that meet the individual student’s needs will best enhance positive outcomes.

Many students struggle with the transition from a supportive K-12 setting to a more independent postsecondary environment. For a student with ASD, the struggles can be multiplied, and can even become overwhelming. To address these needs, universities must make a concerted effort to identify incoming students with ASD, effectively communicate services provided, and seek to enhance these services when possible. These services should be emphasized during a student’s first year in order to identify needs and establish a positive academic and social foundation; services may then be reduced or revised once a routine is established. However, it is important to note that students may need comparable services all four years, as not all ASD challenges can be reduced through routines and coping strategies. Some students in this study were able to experience some academic success early, but later became frustrated and discouraged trying to sustain their efforts long-term.

One of the most significant findings of this study, which was most prevalent in the student responses, is that social support can be as important as academic support for students with ASD. Unfortunately, specific social supports for students with ASD are almost nonexistent in most postsecondary settings. This lack of social support caused one student in the study to drop out of a residential program and pursue an online degree. Other students felt exceptional degrees of loneliness and depression as a result of lacking social supports. Several students mentioned their inability to develop positive social relationships often resulted in the misconception that they do not desire these relationships, or that they want to be left alone. Most of the students in the study desperately wanted to fit in, but believed that they lacked the social skills to do so. Even when students receive academic support sufficient to help them achieve success in a postsecondary educational setting, social challenges or unmet social needs can undermine academic progress and may result in course failure or program drop-out.

Although a student with ASD may be aware of their academic or social challenges, this does not mean they can overcome these challenges with effort or support. Some of the students in this study were aware that some of their actions could be interpreted as rude, inconsiderate, lazy, or unmotivated by those around them. Educating faculty, staff, and even students, on some of the common characteristics of students with ASD may help to promote an environment of patience and understanding in a postsecondary setting.

Parents, students with ASD, educators, and professionals who work with students with ASD can use the information gleaned from this research to make informed decisions regarding educational opportunities. Knowing what factors impact learning, whether positively or negatively, will help parents, students, university faculty, and other professionals working with students with ASD make informed decisions regarding supports or services. Being able to identify factors that impact learning may potentially be the difference between the success or failure for the student with ASD transitioning into, or persistently pursuing
completion of, a postsecondary degree or program.

References


Schindler, V., Cajiga, A., Aaronson, R., & Salas, L. (2015). The experience of
transition to college for students diagnosed with Asperger’s disorder. Open Journal of Occupational Therapy, 3(1). doi:10.15453/2168-6408.1129
Tracking Social Isolation, Academic Self-Efficacy and Adjustment to College: Self-Reported Perceptions Across the First Semester of College

Sara Connolly, Ph.D., David Oberleitner, Ph.D., and Joseph Guarneri

The transition to college places major life change alongside rapid psychosocial and cognitive development. Despite the breadth of research on college transition, few studies have assessed the impact of psychological difficulties on first-year adjustment. This study aimed to fill this gap by examining the relationship between social isolation, rejection sensitivity, self-efficacy, and college adjustment over the course of the first year. Across multiple time points, higher reported social isolation and rejection sensitivity were both associated with lower reported academic self-efficacy and negative college adjustment.

College has been widely established to be a rewarding, but difficult time for those pursuing a degree after high school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Literature has established that students face numerous challenges in their pursuit of a degree. Factors such as mental health issues (American College Health Association, 2013), inter- and intrapersonal tensions (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999), and academic stresses (Ross et al., 1999) are a normal part of the academic experience of the college student.

Despite some of the issues that college students may face, there are well-established benefits to pursuing a college degree: College graduates earn more, over their lifetime, than non-college graduates; college students also experience higher levels of psychosocial and cognitive development when compared to their non-attending counterparts (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student success in college has also been widely studied (i.e., Astin, 1984, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While Kuh et al. (2006) expanded the definition of student success beyond academic achievement and graduation rates, most researchers have continued to define student success as graduation from college. Despite the research on college student success, college graduation rates have remained stable over time. Colleges have widely invested in programming (i.e., orientation, first-year seminars, capstone experiences, and learning communities) that have been demonstrated to impact student persistence and engagement rates (Young & Hopp, 2014). The Chronicle of Higher Education...
(2016) reported that the median six-year graduation rate for public four-year colleges was 44.7% and private four-year colleges was 55.8%. These percentages are nearly the same as those reported by Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) for the last 30 years, suggesting that a programming focus is not enough to solve the problem of students not succeeding to graduation. Although engagement and success have been widely studied, other factors have, at times, been neglected in regards to how these constructs may impact the success (broadly defined) of college students. As such, the present study was an initial attempt at exploring how several factors may interact to impact student success, and how psychological factors related to perceptions of the self may need greater attention when working with students at the start of their academic journey.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is a person’s belief in their ability to complete a task to achieve goals. This confidence impacts an individual’s motivation and ability to persevere in the face of difficulty. Bandura’s theory has been applied to the collegiate setting in that students with high levels of self-efficacy (in regards to their academic abilities) will approach school-work as a challenge to be conquered, while students with low levels of (academic) self-efficacy will avoid school-work (Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Solberg, O’Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993). It has also been shown that students who are high in self-efficacy perform better academically and have a greater likelihood of persisting in college compared to those who are lower in self-efficacy (Bong, 2001; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000).

Numerous studies have explored the experience of being socially excluded or perceiving oneself as being socially isolated. One extensive line of work has found that the immediate experience of social exclusion can have deleterious effects on the individual such as lowered feelings of control, belonging, and self-esteem (see Williams, 2007, for a review). It would make sense that these changes in perception of the self might strongly influence how one views oneself academically. Beyond perceptions of the self, social exclusion and social isolation have also been found to impact things such as blood pressure (Hawkley, Masi, Berry, & Cacioppo, 2006) and activation of areas of the brain associated with pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). It stands to reason that both over- and under-confidence may result in a new student feeling a disconnect from those around them who they perceive as being “more fit” for academic challenges.

In a related area of research, rejection sensitivity has been found to be a personality variable that, when the person scores high on this trait, predisposes the individual toward greater attention to situations that may be perceived as being social isolating or where social exclusion may be occurring (Ayduk, Gyrak, & Castriotta, 2005; Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998; Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004; London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007). As such, those high in rejection sensitivity may be more vigilant to possible exclusion, and more likely to interpret ambiguous situations as being one where they are being socially excluded (Downey & Feldman, 1996).

Social isolation can be a contributing factor to lack of success in college students. In one study, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that brief interventions to
increase perceptions of social belonging on college campuses were associated with higher GPAs in minority students. The work of Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, and Neumark-Sztainer (2007) found that social isolation increased negative mental health symptomology, which has previously been established as a contributing factor in the lack of success for college students suffering from mental illness (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009). This increased symptomology was argued, however, as having the potential to be offset with school-based interventions.

College, for many, is a difficult time filled with transitions (Tinto, 1987). Many college students face a myriad of stressors, and these stressors can negatively impact their college performance. Chickering (1969) argued that the social, academic, and emotional adjustment to college may negatively impact those who fail to positively adjust. From this, Pennebaker, Colder, and Sharp (1990) developed a test of college adjustment, examining facets such as homesickness, positive adjustment behaviors (e.g., liking and feeling optimistic about classes) or negative adjustment (e.g., feeling nervous, worrying about academics). Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found (through a longitudinal exploration) that emotional and social adjustment was a stronger prediction of retention than factors more directly related to academic matters (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008).

**Purpose**

Widespread investigations of the prevalence of experienced social isolation, and how social isolation, college adjustment and collegiate self-efficacy interact, have not been widely studied. Given the literature on each of these domains, it can be surmised that these factors all interact and impact first-year college students. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between social isolation, rejection sensitivity, and collegiate self-efficacy with college adjustment. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How are perceptions of collegiate self-efficacy and social isolation interrelated in their impact on first-year students?
2. How do social isolation and rejection sensitivity interact with self-efficacy and self-reported college adjustment?

The information gained in this study can be utilized to inform practice in Student and Academic Affairs, and inform discussion on best practices relating to social factors in first-year students.

**Methodology**

The population studied was first-year students at a mid-size, private, non-sectarian college in the Northeastern United States. The school enrolls approximately 2,800 undergraduate students. The largest percentage of undergraduate students identify as Black (35%). Another 27% of students identify as White, and 18% identify as Hispanic/Latino. Forty-nine percent of undergraduate students receive a Pell grant. The sample studied here closely
mirrors the population overall in their racial identification, with 39.8% identifying as Black, 14% as Hispanic/Latino and 19% identifying as White. Pell grant recipient information was not available for the sample.

There were three data collection time points. For data collection Time Point 1, participants were asked to complete the set of surveys in-person during a welcome week program. The program was listed as a mandatory activity for first-year students. All new students were expected to attend, and orientation leaders walked students to the activity. Participants completed the College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CSEI), the UCLA Social Isolation (Loneliness) scale, the Rejection Sensitivity Scale, and the College Adjustment Test (CAT). Students who attended the program were read the invitation to participate by the researcher, and chose whether or not to complete the survey packet. Students who chose not to complete the survey packet had other tasks to complete during the time given. All participants were free to leave when they were done with their tasks. A total of N=160 was collected at Time Point 1.

Data collection (Time Point 2) occurred during the 6th week of classes. All first-year students (whether they had completed the first survey or not) received an invitation to participate and complete the same set of surveys they received during welcome week (Time Point 1). However, instead of paper instruments, the students received an invitation to participate and a link to complete the survey instruments through Survey Monkey. Seventy-nine students started the survey instruments at the second time point. However, twelve students entered only their ID number as item number 1 in Survey Monkey, and failed to answer any of the other instrument questions. These twelve students were removed from the data set for a total N of 67 at Time Point 2. The third, and final, data collection point was held during the last week of classes of their first semester. Students received the same invitation to participate in the survey and a link to the survey scales in their university email accounts. Sixty-three students started the survey instruments at the Time Point 3. However, six students only entered their ID number as item number 1 in Survey Monkey, and failed to answer any of the other instrument questions. These six students were removed from the data set for a total N of 56 at Time Point 3.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Point</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Removed</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Point 1</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Point 2</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Point 3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instrumentation

The College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CSEI) is a 22-item, Likert-scale instrument, with response points ranging from 0 (totally unconfident) to 8 (totally confident). The items are related to different areas of college life, with thirteen related to academic work and nine focused on the social aspects of college. Sample items ask students to rate their confidence in making new friends at college, their ability to research a term paper, their confidence in their ability to talk with academic and support staff, their ability to manage their time, and their ability to join a student organization. The internal consistency reliability is strong (.93; Solberg, O’Brien, Billarreal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993).

The UCLA Social Isolation Scale (Russell, 1996) measures social isolation across 20 items to explore the myriad of ways someone could feel isolated from others. The participants were asked to reply how they felt on a Likert-style scale from “never” to “always”. Each item begins with “how often...,” and sample items ask how often: “do you feel that you are in tune with people around you,” “do you feel that there is no one that you can turn to,” “do you feel friendly and outgoing,” “do you feel close to people,” and “do you feel that no one really knows you.”

Relatedly, a separate Rejection Sensitivity Scale has been developed (Downey & Feldman, 1996) to explore how much individuals are sensitive to experiences of social rejection and isolation, as well as how much anxiety they have towards these experiences. The Rejection Sensitivity Scale presents the participant with a sample situation and follow-up questions. As an example, one of the situations presented states: “You ask your parents or another family member for a loan to help you through a difficult time.” There are two follow-up questions to that situation. In the first question the participant is asked, “How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your family would want to help you?” In the second follow-up question the participant is asked, “I would expect that they would agree to help me as much as they can.” The participant responds to these follow-up questions with a Likert-scale type response on a scale from “very concerned” to “very unconcerned”, and “very unlikely” to “very likely”.

Separate from these domains has been work on the experiences of first-year students and ways that we can measure their adjustment to college. One scale that attempts this (The College Adjustment Test/“CAT”, by Pennebaker et al., 1990) assesses many of the ways students adjust to the experience of college. The CAT rates items on a scale of 1-7, from “not at all” to a “great deal.” Each statement begins with, “Within the last week to what degree have you...” Sample items include: “missed your friends from high school,” “missed your friends from home,” “liked your classes,” “liked your social life,” “felt angry,” “felt lonely,” and “felt optimistic about your future at college.

Data Cleaning and Scale Creation

SPSS statistical software was utilized for the analysis. Social isolation questions 1, 5, 9, 10, 15, 16, 19, and 20 were recoded so that each item rated on the scale in
the same direction. Similarly, the “b” items on the rejection sensitivity scale were recoded so each item would rate in the same direction for statistical purposes. The college adjustment test additionally had subscales created (via the established formulas) for homesickness, positive affect, negative affect, and overall adjustment to college.

Following this recoding, median splits were created for self-efficacy and social isolation rejection sensitivity in order to obtain a high and low value of rejection sensitivity, social isolation and self-efficacy. This was then dummy-coded into a dichotomous variable for each item. Univariate Analyses (ANOVA) were utilized to determine the interactions between factors.

Results

Self-efficacy and social isolation. It was found that several main effects and interactions occurred with the target variables. Self-efficacy was found to interact with social isolation and with rejection sensitivity at various time points. The univariate analysis revealed that, at Time Point 1, higher reported social isolation was associated with lower reported self-efficacy \( (F(1, 132) = 14.342, p < .001) \) (See Table 2). As participants had not yet had measurable time in college, the CAT was not analyzed. No other significant relationships existed at Time Point 1.

### TABLE 2

| Social Isolation and Self-Efficacy Mean Values for Academic Self-Efficacy |
|-----------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|
| N | Mean Value For Academic Self-Efficacy | Std. Deviation |
| Low Social Isolation | 64 | 138.95 | 21.02 |
| High Social Isolation | 70 | 125.44 | 20.16 |
| Total | 134 | 131.89 | 21.59 |

At Time Point 2, a significant relationship was found between self-efficacy and rejection sensitivity. Participants high in rejection sensitivity had significantly lower academic self-efficacy \( (F(1, 33) = 15.37, p < .001) \). At Time Point 2, a significant interaction was found between rejection sensitivity and social isolation on self-efficacy \( (F(4, 30) = 9.808, p = .004) \) (See Table 3). Using median split, those students high in rejection sensitivity had an overall lower academic self-efficacy, however, those high in rejection sensitivity and high in social isolation had higher academic self-efficacy than those high in rejection sensitivity and low in social isolation.
At Time Point 3, self-efficacy was significantly related to social isolation, with those scoring high in social isolation having significantly lower academic self-efficacy ($F(1, 34) = 6.70, p = .014$), and with those participants high in perceived social isolation having a mean self-efficacy score of 160.31 versus a score of 140.00 for those low in perceived social isolation. Also at Time Point 3, self-efficacy was significantly related to rejection sensitivity. Participants high in rejection sensitivity also had significantly lower academic self-efficacy ($F(1, 32) = 6.13, p = .019$) with those participants high in rejection sensitivity having a mean self-efficacy score of 162.47 versus a score of 141.39 for those low in perceived social isolation. No interaction of these factors was significant.

The interaction between self-efficacy, rejection sensitivity, and college adjustment. Univariate statistical analysis also demonstrated that several of the variables had a significant interaction on college adjustment at Time Point 2 and Time Point 3. At Time Point 2 (see Table 4 and Figure 1) the participants with higher social isolation scores also had greater negative affect ($F(1, 33) = 4.59, p = .039$). Participants with higher social isolation also had higher homesickness scores on the CAT ($F(1, 35) = 7.58, p = .009$), and participants with lower social isolation had better college adjustment overall ($F(1, 34) = 8.61, p = .006$). No other relationships were significant at Time Point 2 in regards to college adjustment factors.

### TABLE 3

**Interaction of Rejection Sensitivity and Social Isolation on Academic Self-Efficacy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Value For Academic Self-Efficacy</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low R.S. + Low S.I</td>
<td>169.90</td>
<td>17.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low R.S. + High S.I</td>
<td>153.50</td>
<td>14.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Low R.S.</td>
<td>163.75</td>
<td>17.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High R.S. + Low S.I</td>
<td>118.83</td>
<td>26.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High R.S. + High S.I</td>
<td>144.33</td>
<td>14.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total High R.S.</td>
<td>134.13</td>
<td>22.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: R.S. = Rejection Sensitivity and S.I = Social Isolation*
At Time Point 3, participants who scored low in self-efficacy also scored lower in positive college adjustment ($F(1, 39) = 11.35, p = .002$), with a mean of 29.30 for the low group versus 34.40 for the high group. Participants who scored high in social isolation had lower overall college adjustment ($F(1, 37) = 9.41, p = .004$), with those participants high in perceived social isolation having an average (mean) overall adjustment to college score of 74.35 vs. 88.72 for those low in perceived social isolation.

**Discussion**

This study demonstrates that social isolation, rejection sensitivity, and academic self-efficacy are related in the first-year college student sample studied.
Students who perceive themselves to be socially isolated or who are sensitive to rejection have their academic self-efficacy negatively impacted. This perception can result in a perpetuated feeling of isolation from their peers and create a cycle of perceived rejection and low collegiate self-efficacy.

It is not surprising then, that this study additionally demonstrates that each of these, individually, is related to college adjustment at varying points in the semester. Self-efficacy, as well as social isolation, affected the first-year students’ adjustment to college. These results illustrate that students need to perceive that they belong to the academic and social systems of the college in order to feel that they are able to achieve collegiate success. Given that this study simply measured perceptions of these factors, it may be the case that a student is objectively prepared for college, or objectively has a large friend network, but still perceives that they are underprepared or lacking in social connections.

In the models of student involvement and student engagement (Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto 1994), the focus is on engaging the student in the academic and social systems of the college. As a result of this focus, a great deal of effort is placed on the college to create programs for groups of students so that all students find a place that they can get involved. Research in the area of engagement has led to expanded orientation and first-year programming, living and learning communities, faculty-led seminars, expanded campus activities, and freshmen interest groups (and many other programs). These programs are a valuable addition, yet retention and graduation rates remain relatively stable (Bowen et al., 2009). This research suggests that there is more to be uncovered. Individual differences in personality (rejection sensitivity), and perceptions of the self in regards to social connectedness and academic competence are impacting the first-year student by influencing their adjustment to college. Couple this with other well-established factors that can harm the first-year student, and there exists a situation that must be addressed. Students sometimes come to college with a positive psychological mindset, but this may change within a few weeks to a mindset that makes successful college adjustment more difficult. It may be helpful for these students to receive individual assistance prior to the start of school and throughout their first year, to assist in changing their perceptions. The attributions students make to explain why they feel disconnected, or why they feel they are less prepared than their peers, may truly be based on their perception, and this presents a challenge for a one-size-fits-all first-year programming model. Recent research has shown that perceived social isolation can negatively impact physical and mental wellbeing (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014), while self-efficacy beliefs can affect GPA and student persistence (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010). Therefore, a student may objectively have strong academic skills and a large friend network, but if they believe they do not, they often suffer negative consequences. Perhaps an intervention program can be designed to improve students’ feelings of connectedness with the campus and their peers, thereby decreasing perceived social isolation and increasing academic self-efficacy.
Future Research

This study provides the initial steps in determining if the impact of social isolation, rejection sensitivity, and academic self-efficacy on college adjustment is extended to retention and grades. Do these students who feel less adjusted to college (due to feelings of social isolation or a lack of academic efficacy) also leave at a higher rate than those who have higher self-efficacy, less rejection sensitivity, and higher college adjustment? Do those who stay have a GPA that is negatively impacted? As previously discussed, it is shown that self-efficacy is also related to grade point average, and persistence (Bong, 2001; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). However, it is necessary to extend this research to see how this interaction (academic self-efficacy with social isolation, rejection sensitivity and college adjustment) impacts grade point average, and to determine if the impact of self-efficacy on grades is direct, or if it is indirect through factors such as rejection sensitivity, social isolation, or college adjustment. As stated above, an intervention program could be designed to improve perceived social connection and academic self-efficacy as well as to present the students high in rejection sensitivity with strategies to avoid assuming that others are leaving them out. Future research would need to assess such a program to determine its impact and effectiveness.

Additionally, future research should assess if there is a baseline at which social isolation and academic self-efficacy become problematic for the student. In the present study, a median split was used to separate high vs. low on these factors. As such, there is no objective cutoff for what should be viewed as a critical level of perceived isolation, or for when self-doubt about one’s academic abilities becomes a cause for concern. By replicating this study with additional cohorts, with different campus environments, and varied student backgrounds, it might be possible to learn when these factors become truly deleterious to the individual. Once this is established, future research can then begin to focus on targeted interventions for the most at-risk students.

Limitations

First, this study was limited by the number of participants who completed the series of questions across all time points. It was anticipated that there would be a larger sample size in the first group because students were brought to complete the survey by their orientation leader. While incentives were utilized, these were not a strong-enough incentive to encourage students to participate in the online survey. This resulted in a lower sample size at Time Points 2 and 3. Although comparing individual students across time points would have been ideal, the sample size of students who participated in all three time points was not large enough for meaningful comparisons. In order to address this issue, the study should be replicated.

The study was also limited by the fact that it was conducted on a single campus. While the data came from a large cross section of the first-year class, the students from this private not-for-profit university may be different in these factors.
than students from other universities (including other private schools, community colleges, and state colleges and universities). It would be valuable to repeat this methodology again with multiple sites.

Lastly, while not fully a limitation, no analyses were conducted assessing demographics of the student participants in the sample. Although there were no direct hypotheses relating to demographic background of the student, the present study cannot determine if factors such as gender, first-generation status, or racial/ethnic background may also be an interactive factor with the other variables.

References


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Examining the Inclusivity of Parent and Family College Orientations: A Directed Content Analysis

Casandra E. Harper, Judy Marquez Kiyama, Delma Ramos, and David Aguayo

This study examined the inclusivity language and general characteristics (e.g., cost, duration, types of sessions offered) of 82 orientation programs across 35 states in the U.S. A directed content analysis of orientation websites revealed logistical considerations of attending orientation, such as cost and duration of orientation; variation in inclusive language regarding the use of parent, family, and friend terminology; and potential strategies for increased inclusivity and partnerships between parent and family orientation programs.

Analysis

Campus efforts to address the needs of parents and families of today’s college students have flourished, particularly through parent programs and orientations (Savage, 2008; Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008). The role of parents is gaining attention as an area for research, particularly regarding diverse families’ involvement in the college experience (Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012; Kiyama & Harper, 2015). Communication with parents is critical (Daniel et al., 2009) because better-informed parents can provide more support for their children, which improves students’ adjustment (Carney-Hall, 2008; Kolkhorst, Yazedjian, & Toews, 2010). Carney-Hall (2008) recommends institutions foster positive relationships with parents through their programming. Institutions are encouraged to invite families to orientation and other events that inform families about student support services offered by campuses to improve the college transition experience (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2012). Scholars have argued for more transparency regarding college costs, scholarships, and funding, particularly among students who are the first in their families to attend college, low-income students, and families of color (Burdman, 2005). One venue for sharing this information is through orientation programs. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which a sample of orientation programs was inclusive of diverse families through an analysis of the
Language used referring to parents and families. In addition, this study also sought to establish the inclusivity of specific characteristics of the orientation programs (e.g., cost, duration, types of sessions offered).

Literature Review

Orientation programs provide higher education institutions a formative opportunity to develop positive relationships with parents and family members (Carney-Hall, 2008), with the overall intent of supporting students (Ward-Roof et al., 2008). These programs can open the lines of communication with parents and families and clarify the availability of campus resources and contacts (Cutright, 2008). Some have argued that institutions need to create programs for parents and students that serve a more diverse set of parents (Coburn & Woodward, 2001; Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Lombardi et al., 2012). For example, more orientation programs now acknowledge the involvement of additional family members, such as grandparents, siblings, and other key supporters (Mayer, 2011). The composition of families should also be inclusive of single parents, blended, and extended families (Donovan, 2003). This inclusion of parents and additional family members can help facilitate students’ transition to college (Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2012; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Donovan (2003) highlights the need to provide additional communication for families with students who are the first in their families to attend college (e.g., avoid using jargon) during orientation programs. Offering programming in multiple languages can be helpful in reaching non-native English speakers (Kiyama & Harper, 2015). Sensitive to the needs of first-generation students, others suggest that communication or special orientation sessions with students and parents should be tailored to their needs and offered in accessible locations (Coburn & Woodward, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Among parent and family programming staff, parent orientation programs are consistently cited as a pride point among the services and programs offered (Savage & Petree, 2013). Previously identified, helpful orientation topics include: the college transition experience, campus resources and services, success strategies and expectations, and institutional integration (Budny & Paul, 2003). While the vast majority of institutions offer some type of parent and family member orientation experience, very little research or assessment has been done with these programs to establish their unique features (Savage & Petree, 2011). The literature also fails to capture a descriptive understanding, much less an analysis of inclusivity, of orientation programs and their basic characteristics, including cost, duration, programmatic content, and language used to describe parents and families.

These topical areas are important to investigate because they provide an indication of how open and accessible orientations are to families, as well as evidence of potential barriers to participation. Parents and families have been positively associated with student outcomes (Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009) and may help ease the transition to college, particularly for underrepresented students (Dennis et al., 2005; Lombardi et al., 2012). Specially,
support and involvement from parents has been associated with lower levels of adjustment stress among students transitioning to college (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Many researchers have found evidence of the beneficial role that family involvement offers students during that first-year transition to college (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011).

Orientation programs offer institutions an opportunity to open communication channels with the families of entering college students (Cutright, 2008). Expanding attention beyond just parents to other family members widens the focus and better represents the support offered to today’s college students (Mayer, 2011). Thus, the inclusion of parents and families in orientation programs provides support, resources, and a sense of appreciation and acknowledgement of their role (Budny & Paul, 2003). Our research question for this study is: To what extent does a sample of orientation programs offer inclusive language and practices (in the form of their cost, duration, and session offerings) to diverse parents and families?

**Methods**

In order to investigate the offerings of college orientation programs, we started with the membership list of two parent associations relevant to higher education and student affairs: NODA—Association for Orientation Transition and Retention in Higher Education, and AHEPPP—Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals. Our rationale was that these associations would be more likely to have institutional members that offered parent and family programs. We randomly selected a subset of institutions from each association’s membership list, and purposefully sampled to ensure the geographic diversity of our sample. We also ensured that both public and private institutions were included. The criteria in purposeful sampling strategies included: type of institution (public, private) and geographic location within different regions of the United States. In addition to this list, we also included a sample of institutions that were not members of either association. For all institutions, we retrieved information about the programs through an online search. This strategy was informed by our assumption that parents or family members might be looking for and retrieving this information online as well, and this might be the primary means of communicating program details with families. We also contend that websites can convey cultural messages and values (Zhao, Massey, Murphy, & Fang, 2003), and past research has established the importance of transmitting the sociocultural values of families and communities of color as a means of establishing positive college ideologies (Kiyama, 2010).

**Sample**

Data were gathered from 82 institutions located in 35 states. All 82 institutions
were four-year institutions, 24 were private and 58 were public. The institutions sampled included baccalaureate (4), master’s (26), and research universities (52). Our sample included a balance of institutions that were members of NODA (14, which is approximately 21% of the regional leadership member institutions of NODA), AHEPPP (34, which is one-third of the AHEPPP institutional membership), and both associations (9), as well as 25 institutions that were not members of either association. We reached a data saturation point and felt that the sample of institutions offered a variety of institutional types from different regions. We make no claims about the representativeness of the institutions of either association (NODA or AHEPPP), as we have no way of making this assertion.

**Development of Categories and Coding Procedures**

Consistent with our desire to capture key concepts guided by existing literature and theory, we utilized a directed content analysis, a strategy involving a structured approach to the data utilizing pre-determined codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis can be a useful tool for examining the meaning of patterns and trends contained within documents, in this case online materials (Stemler, 2001). Pre-determined codes were informed by existing research: use of language and terminology, program duration, program cost, and program content. We paid particular attention to any programming specifically targeted at first-generation, low-income, or families of color. The research team, comprised of four members who have both qualitative research experience and have published in the area of family and parent programs and experiences, established the coding process and thorough cross-checked analysis to ensure consistency in one another’s coding. We think the information conveyed online provides key basic-level information about the programs and their primary areas of focus. This descriptive analysis of parent and family orientation programs provides a preliminary understanding of the range of programs currently available across a sample of U.S. institutions. This analysis also provides an understanding of the programmatic offerings available to parents and families within this sample of orientation programs.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this approach is that the information provided online might not be accurate, current, or fully reflective of all that the programs have to offer. Similarly, some parent and family programs might not be advertised online but might exist and be shared with parents through email, letters, or other forms of communication to which the research team was not privy. We also acknowledge that not all parents or family members will access this information online, but we do think this analysis is worthwhile and that the language and content presented online provides some indication of the values and assumptions of orientation staff members. We think that these views might extend into and help shape orientation as well.
Findings

The results of our directed content analysis reveal key themes regarding the characteristics of orientation programs, including their cost, duration, program description, and session content. These results will be discussed first, followed by the analysis of the language used to refer to parents and families.

Cost

As finances are already a deterrent to higher education access, the cost of the program is an important factor to consider, because this might create participation barriers for parents and families. Our findings revealed that assessing the cost of orientation mirrors the complexity in trying to assess the overall cost of attending college (Perna, 2006). There was a wide range of fees described, where some programs specifically named and priced all anticipated costs (e.g., meals, housing, parking, materials), whereas other programs did not mention costs but also did not clarify that attendance was free. Other programs described fees but without specifying whether each of the anticipated costs were covered. Some programs mentioned a per person fee (not differentiating between students and other guests), some differentiated fees specific to students differently than parent fees, some programs charged by the family, and other programs offered a tiered system where the first person or parent was charged a particular fee and additional guests could be added at a discounted rate. It is important to note that even beyond the orientation fee and anticipated costs, there are other potential costs associated with attending orientation that might not be explicitly stated or discussed, including transportation costs, hotels, daycare or alternative arrangements for family members staying home, and lost wages if work is missed.

One difficulty in capturing the cost of orientation is that some programs in our sample (12%) characterized the cost as being free when, in fact, the fee is rolled into the overall cost of attending that institution and no specific cost is mentioned, or students are indeed charged a specific fee that is noted but is rolled into their tuition and fees. Nearly all of the programs in our sample did not charge the student but did charge for parents, persons, and/or guests, making the cost of orientation somewhat difficult to characterize for our classification purposes. We decided to classify cost according to what the student was charged, with the assumption that this would be the minimum possible charge. By this, we mean that at minimum institutions would charge the student then family and other guests for attending orientation. Since no previous studies of this kind exist, we have no basis of comparison to what has been done in other studies. Of the six programs that specified a charge to students, the cost ranged from $28 to $320, with the average totaling $137.

Only six programs included the cost of meals in the orientation fees. Similarly, six programs specified additional costs for housing, where the average charge to stay in campus housing was $35 per night. One program described offering care for younger siblings with a charge of $18 for childcare, although the duration
and other details related to the length of this option was not clarified. In contrast, another program specifically noted that additional guests beyond the student could attend but needed to be at least 17 years of age. Approximately one-fifth of the programs (22%) charged up to $50 to participate in orientation (66% of which charged $10-$39; 34% charged $40-$50) and 29% charged more than $50. The highest orientation fee within the sample was a public institution charging $320 per student participant and $150 per parent or guest, although the information regarding what that cost included was not offered. Among the programs charging per guest, the cost for the first guest ranged between $15 and $150, with the average totaling $56. Slightly over one-third of the sample (37%) did not clearly specify whether there was an orientation fee.

Duration

Nearly two-thirds of the orientation programs sampled had programs lasting between one (e.g., 8am-5pm) and two days. A smaller proportion of programs held shorter programs lasting less than one day (11%) and an equal proportion lasted two to three days (9%), or more than three days (1%). Interestingly, 13% of the programs were unclear about the starting and ending times of their orientation program.

Content

In order to assess the types of sessions offered within the orientation programs and their content and focus, we reviewed any session descriptions that were included and developed a list of themes of the offerings. The most common program content themes were campus resources (50%) and academics (43%). Financial aid was specifically noted by one-third of the programs (33%). About one-fourth of programs devoted time to strategies for support (23%), around one-fifth covered housing or residence life (22%) and campus safety (18%), and one-sixth covered student involvement opportunities (14%). Only 9% of programs mentioned campus policies as a theme.

In addition to these primary content themes, there were some additional themes that were mentioned less frequently and could have been part of the broader thematic categories mentioned above. Since they were mentioned specifically, we wanted to make note of these additional content areas. Programs emphasized communication or relationship-building through workshops and meetings, or through sessions about the relationships between or among parents and the institution (broadly defined or with specific administrators/offices, advisors, or faculty) and relationships between families attending orientation. Sessions focused on preparing families for key issues or needs that students might encounter or have questions about while in college, such as campus safety, alcohol and drug abuse, technology, textbooks, employment and career planning, parking and transportation, and other common student challenges. The remaining sessions were targeted toward specific experiences available to students (e.g., study abroad,
prayer groups, Greek Life).

Language

We were interested in capturing whether and how any references to parent(s), family, families (including specific individuals: mom, dad, sibling, grandparents, etc.), and friend were used. Within the titles of the orientation program names, 44% included parents in their title, 27% did not refer to parents or families at all, and 23% used the term families. Four programs in the sample mentioned friend in their orientation program name (5%), and one program did not specify a program name (1%). With regard to program description content, the use of parent, families, family, and friend also varied. Family appeared 36 times while families only appeared 12 times in program descriptions. Parents appeared 44 times; parent was used 31 times. The terms friend and friends were seldom used in program descriptions, twice and once, respectively.

Another aspect of our analysis revealed statements of inclusion that were directed specifically toward members of students’ families or support networks. Some of these statements were made in reference to orientation as a whole or the philosophy or priorities of the institution, broadly speaking. For example, one institution said, “We’d also like to welcome you into the [institution] community as a valuable part of your student’s educational journey.” Another institution noted the importance of families: “[Institution] would like to make the college experience family friendly because the family unit will be the greatest support system for students as they navigate through college.” Similarly, another institution connected family support with student success: “In our work to ensure success of first time students at [Institution], we make partnering with parents and family members one of our top priorities.”

Some programs described an orientation session directed at adjustment, noting “a special program designed to provide key information about the adjustments new college students and parents will face during the next few years.” Another institution offered “a complete program designed specially for parents and adult family members to address their needs through this transition.” This sentiment was echoed in another institutional statement that emphasized the transition to college is felt beyond just the student: “We realize that a student’s transition to [Institution] is shared by the whole family. We feel that orientation can benefit parents and guardians, as well as the students. Orientation is more than just another campus tour.” While these statements were not geared specifically toward first-generation participants, they offer insight into how institutions might convey the extent to which students’ families and supporters are valued, that their participation is important, and that students are not the only ones who are experiencing a transition.
Discussion

Within higher education, students’ parents and families are representative of more diverse family configurations (Redding, Murphy, & Sheley, 2011) with multiple forms of involvement and engagement. Inclusive programming for college students’ families creates an environment for a range of opportunities to further strengthen familial relationships that are known to contribute to enhanced college transition and success for students (Carney-Hall, 2008; Kiyama & Harper, 2015). It has become important, then, for institutions to establish family-friendly environments throughout campus. One component of this includes orientation and transition programming. The present study builds on existing orientation programming research by examining 82 orientation programs across the United States to determine the characteristics of the programs (e.g., cost, duration, types of sessions offered) and to see whether messages of inclusivity regarding supporters (parents, families, friends, significant others, etc.) were shared. These results reveal potential barriers to participation and highlight innovative practices that orientation programs can offer with respect to communication and fostering positive relationships with parents and families.

Implications for Practice

Logistical Considerations

The cost of attending orientation varied widely for students and families. Given that costly program fees may prohibit or discourage families, especially those with limited financial resources, from participating in orientation activities, we encourage institutions to explore billing options such as adding these fees to students’ tuition and fee statements. Doing so may allow some students to utilize their financial aid packages, particularly grants and scholarships, to help cover the cost of attending orientation for themselves and their families. There are additional considerations related to the complicated financial aid application process and the need for further clarity about the process, particularly among low-income youth and their families (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Alternatively, finding other ways of covering this cost, such as through fundraising by campus parent groups or other sponsorship opportunities, might be another possible strategy.

Similarly, the length of programs can also pose a barrier for families. Although most programs in our content analysis did not charge extra for extended programming, there may be additional costs like time away from work, travel and lodging expenses, and childcare for siblings. One obvious suggestion is partnering with local hotels and residence halls to lower costs, which many programs do. A problem with a less clear solution is finding ways to ensure childcare is available, and is affordable or free, during orientation. Alternatively, we encourage institutions to explore other means of sharing orientation information, including: live and recorded streaming of sessions, smart phone apps to share
important transition information and tips, and interactive online workshops. Another possibility could be orientation workshops offered in local communities. Given the potential limitations in staffing and funding already facing orientation programming, this strategy might be successful by partnering with parent and alumni groups who might be able to assist with coordination.

Inclusivity Strategies

Given our focus on language and terminology, it is important to address the implications for designing more inclusive materials for diverse families as they navigate orientation websites. First, although only two programs noted friends and only 23% used the term families, these programs serve as important examples of capturing the expansive network of support available to students. We encourage practitioners to consider language beyond parent(s) and suggest terms like families, support members, and guests, recognizing that some families will also be attending with grandparents, siblings, and extended family members.

Second, we did not find examples of specific programming focused on first-generation, low-income, and families of color. Thus, we encourage practitioners to think broadly about how these families can be engaged in culturally-relevant ways beyond programmatic efforts by multicultural affairs offices. Likewise, creating inclusive and family-friendly spaces requires that departments across institutions also utilize inclusive language, offering many opportunities for cross-departmental collaborations on college campuses. Although programs may offer these sessions during orientation, explicitly noting the sessions on documents offers more inclusive signals to diverse families. For example, it is important to offer a session for first-generation families but to also explain this terminology and convey, in positive terms, recognition for the assets they bring to their student and the institution. Finally, practitioners should pay special attention to the primary languages spoken by their incoming students and families. When possible, offering documents that are translated into the home language of families will create a more inclusive welcome for families (Kiyama & Harper, 2015).

Strategies for Sharing Across Programs

One implication from this study is to find a way for orientation program staff to share a database of innovative programming and language, as well as logistical details, similar to the one we created for this review of orientation content. An interactive database that allows for edits and updates would offer a resource for orientation practitioners to reference best practices, inclusive programming, and innovative program elements from across the country. Such an effort could be housed and supported by one or both of the orientation or parent associations relevant to higher education and student affairs sampled for this study, NODA and AHEPPP, or perhaps by another student affairs association.

As previously noted, collaboration across departments might maximize
resources and build on existing efforts and skills. Institutions tend to work in silos, but we further wonder if creative partnerships between institutions are possible. For example, partnering with local community partners or colleges may allow for a greater breadth of programming to occur for families regarding the common transition-to-college issues that might emerge regardless of the specific campus a student chooses to attend. This programming can occur within families’ own neighborhoods, potentially reducing travel costs and time away from work, and may create a sense of comfort and familiarity within their environment. Local partner institutions might also pool financial resources to offer childcare or parallel college-going programming for younger siblings. Each of these efforts might help incorporate the entire family into the college transition experience.

**Implications for Research**

This study offers a descriptive analysis of orientation programs across the country. The next step of this research agenda is to determine how parents and families are interpreting this type of information regarding orientation programs, including cost, duration, session content, and language. Future research might determine the true cost of attending orientation and the extent to which some families are dissuaded from participating due to affordability or logistical issues associated with the duration of orientation. Research might also determine the extent to which the advertised content matches the actual orientation sessions that parents and families experience. This would help determine what additional messages are being conveyed at orientation. Additional research that assesses orientation programs occurring off-campus within communities and spaces convenient to parents and families would help offer insights into alternative programming options.

**Conclusion**

Orientation serves a key function in a student’s transition to college. The students’ family members, friends, and other supporters are also experiencing some degree of transition as well, and our study reveals that some orientation programs are aware of and able to provide added support to these individuals. There are additional opportunities for programs to add more inclusive language about potential attendees, offer more clarity about the cost of participating in orientation, and increase innovative practices to help share best practices and resources.
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Blueprints for Student Success: High School Students’ Questions about the Transition to College

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This article describes the questions and concerns students from rural communities in a frontier state have about transitioning to college. Findings from the study have resulted in several interactive virtual tools and face-to-face programs to support students’ development of college knowledge. The authors advance the need for greater partnerships between college and high school staff in the college readiness domain and suggest admissions, orientation, and transition staff are well-suited to lead such research-to-practice partnerships.

The majority of American high school students aspire to higher education. Currently, 95% of high school seniors expect to attend college of some kind, which has increased from 79% in 1981 (Goldrick-Rab & Cook, 2011). The increased percentage of students aspiring to higher education has manifested in a college-going student population that is more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse (Renn & Reason, 2013; Davis, 2010). Despite an increasingly diverse student body, more students aspire to attend college than actually enroll. The degree to which students do not realize their educational expectations varies by gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Seifert, Wells, Saunders, & Gopaul, 2013). Students in rural areas also experience unrealized educational expectations. Past research has found that students in rural areas express a reluctance to leave their community and concerns about the cost of living elsewhere, internalize family expectations to maintain the family farm or business, experience conflicting values in relation to continuing education, and/or feel lost in the academic jargon of the application and admissions process (Ardoin, 2013; Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012; Irvin, Byun, Meece, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012; Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011; McDonough, Gildersleeve, & McClafferty-Jarvsky, 2010). Together these factors present a significant barrier for rural students’ college application, enrollment, and completion (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2012).

The challenge for high school counselors and college orientation, transition, and retention advisors in assisting students from rural areas to realize their educational expectations is compounded in a state such as Montana where this
research was conducted. Located in the Northwest corner of the United States, Montana is the 4th largest state and the 3rd most sparsely populated with an average of 7 people per square mile (Montana Association of Counties, 2015; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). Its dynamic geography and extreme wind and weather conditions create natural barriers between communities and accentuate the remote, isolated nature of Montana’s cities and towns. In fact, these features lead to a more accurate definition of frontier since community members must travel extreme distances to access services of any kind (Montana Department of Public Health & Human Services, 2011; National Center for Frontier Communities, 2014).

It is important to note that over 82% of Montana cities and towns are defined as frontier. Only 7 of Montana’s 304 (2%) communities hold populations over 10,000 and of those, only 3 (1%) meet the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of “urbanized” at a minimum of 50,000 citizens (National Center for Frontier Communities, 2014; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This explains the abundance of high schools (81%) with student bodies of 339-120 (27%) or 119-6 students (54%) (Houghtaling, 2017). The unique, frontier features of Montana’s communities and high schools result in a struggle to provide access to and consistency in robust, college-readiness experiences across all high schools simply due to distance of resources (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Houghtaling, 2017; NICHE.com Inc, 2018).

Students begin college with the desire to draft a blueprint for their success but often lack the knowledge tools to do so. College readiness programs such as Upward Bound and Talent Search, as well as high school counselors, are invaluable in preparing students academically and also preparing them to navigate the college-choice, application, and financial aid process. However, these programs may not fully introduce the programs, people and processes that exist on college campuses to support success. Metaphorically, this is as if college-bound students are seated at a drafting table on a stool with two legs. They are unbalanced as they sketch their blueprint, since the third leg—college knowledge—is missing (see figure 1). Developing college knowledge requires learning higher education’s language/jargon, structure, norms and values, also known as the hidden curriculum (Smith, 2013), as these differ significantly from high school. Yet, college knowledge is one of “the most important problems in rural students’ college decision process” (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004, p. 13). This study investigates high school students’ questions about the college transition in an effort to understand their baseline college knowledge. The perspective of these students is particularly important as it highlights a unique perspective from frontier populations (Byun, Irvin, & Meece, 2015; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). Findings from this research can inform university educators’ efforts to partner with high school counselors in geographically isolated contexts to engage in preparing their students in the college readiness process. Moreover, these findings may also inform first-year orientation and transition programming at institutions with a critical mass of rural students. Without college-going knowledge and tools to navigate the first-year transition to higher education, the gap between rural communities and the college experience remains wide and difficult to cross.
Literature Review

High school and college are two separate worlds, with different historical origins and purposes. Thus, transitioning from high school to college presents challenges. Beyond the formal academic curriculum lies higher education’s “hidden curriculum,” which Smith (2013) defines as “the unwritten, norms, values, and expectations that unofficially and implicitly govern the interactions among students, faculty, professional staff, and administrators” (p. 3). Once students arrive on the college campus, they encounter the hidden curriculum as it manifests in different, albeit rarely explicitly stated expectations, attitudes, and behaviors. For example, the manner in which it is expected for students to communicate with a college professor is different than the manner in which they may have communicated with a familiar high school teacher. Additionally, a college campus is an organizationally complicated place, with some centralized and other decentralized and/or duplicative support services, requiring student agency and perseverance to navigate (Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011). Moreover, a multi-faceted set of knowledge and skills is necessary, including the ability to interact with a variety of different types of people (faculty, staff, students), study independently and with groups on challenging assignments, understand the values and norms of college, develop academically-purposeful habits, balance multiple roles, and seek help when needed (Carter, Locks, & Winkle-Wagner, 2012; Conley, 2008, 2010; Karp & Bork, 2012; Tierney, Ragusa, Blumberg Corwin, & Fullerton, 2013; Wilson-Strydom, 2014).

Students arrive at college with a differing awareness of the hidden curriculum, largely as a result of the cultural capital they possess based upon their background. Students who have grown up with family and friends who have earned college degrees tend to possess a disposition of mind that values higher education. This form of embodied cultural capital is the cultivation of habit and taste, and is referred to as one’s habitus (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). In addition to habitus, students who come from such backgrounds also benefit in terms of institutionalized cultural capital that academic qualifications bestow. Beyond the benefits accrued by possessing a university degree, institutionalized cultural capital confers the knowledge of higher education’s norms, values, and expectations—the hidden curriculum—to students. As noted previously, more students are attending college who may not possess the cultural capital necessary to navigate higher education’s hidden curriculum. These students are the least likely to have the knowledge about college that is necessary to succeed.

Rural areas of the U.S. typically have the lowest levels of educational attainment (Rubisch, 1995), and students from rural areas often face challenges due to both their first-generation student status, along with issues related to rural status (Heinisch, 2016). Heinisch found that rural students at a Midwestern university faced challenges adjusting to college, including unrealistic expectations and a longer than average adjustment period. Many of these rural students, having previously attended small high schools with students they had known their entire lives, struggled with the large university, diverse student body, and the
feeling of being anonymous (Heinisch, 2016). Understanding college jargon and accessing information about college tends to be challenging for rural students as well. Chenoweth & Galliher (2004) found that rural Appalachian students struggled with a lack of information about college in general, along with more specific information regarding financial aid. Ardoin (2013) studied rural high school students as well, finding that they tended to possess low levels of knowledge around college/university jargon and knowledge, and sometimes had a tendency to panic when confronted with typical university processes involving the college application process.

One way to assist students to decode higher education’s hidden curriculum is by developing their college knowledge (Ardoin, 2013; Smith, 2013; Tierney et al., 2013). Programs such as new student orientation, first-year experience seminars, and other first-year programming may address the “college knowledge” needed for a successful transition, but not all students take part, not all colleges offer these services, their foci differ (Young & Hopp, 2014), and they occur after a student is already enrolled and attending college. In light of such uncertain student engagement and variation in programming, it seems logical that in order to prepare college-ready students, some college knowledge needs to be developed prior to matriculation.

College readiness is typically in the purview of high school counselors. Yet, high school counselors are often overwhelmed by very high counselor to student ratios (Woods & Domina, 2014), with ratios as high as 1:725 in urban settings (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009). In rural settings, another problem can occur in which a single counselor is meeting the developmental needs of an entire K-12 district. Despite these challenges, school agents are often the only source or at least the most popular source of college-going information for some students. Kimura-Walsh and colleagues (2009) discovered that school agents were often the most popular source of information for Latina students, even though they were often inaccessible. Another difficulty lies in counselor preparation to address college readiness issues (Morgan, Greenwaldt, & Gosselin, 2014; Savitz-Romer, 2012). Savitz-Romer (2012) found a lack of training in graduate programs around assisting with college preparation and readiness. With a greater emphasis placed on clinical counseling in graduate coursework, college readiness coursework was either nonexistent or consisted of one course in the program.

Partnerships between high schools and colleges have great potential to prepare students to be successful in college, and calls for increased partnership between sectors have existed for years (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2009). For example, Texas has created a P-16 database and implemented innovations with high school counseling (Oliva, 2008). Hooker and Brand (2010), in their study of partnerships and programs directed at increasing college readiness and knowledge of high school students, concluded by recommending that legislators should promote providers sharing common objectives leading to college and career readiness, support programs that help students and families build college knowledge, and assist K-12 schools and colleges to collaborate more extensively. Hooker and Brand also suggested that
many community providers can assist with providing the knowledge that students need to succeed in college. As Carter et al. (2012) state, “perhaps institutions, particularly those in close proximity to each other, need to develop/recommit to consortia and combine efforts and think about transition to college options that help students from a variety of institutions learn the skills and orientations needed to be successful in a post-secondary environment” (p. 136). We are motivated to bridge the resources from Montana’s colleges with high schools and support rural, frontier students in developing the college knowledge necessary to realize their educational expectations. To those ends, our research question was simple: What questions and concerns do current high school students have about the transition to college?

**Methodology and Method**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the questions that high school students in a frontier state, Montana, have about attending college. The setting within an extremely rural state is intentional, as research across rural Midwestern states found rural students tend to have lower educational aspirations than their non-rural peers, even after taking into account student, family, teacher, and school characteristics (Molefe, Burke, Collins, Sparks, & Hoyer, 2017). Additionally, Byun, Meece, & Irvin, (2012) report that rural students are less likely than non-rural students to complete their bachelor’s degrees. Thus, addressing questions about college and developing prospective students’ college knowledge may facilitate a greater likelihood for rural students to realize their educational expectations. The study was conducted within the phenomenological framework (Creswell, 2013). This approach of qualitative research involves the researcher observing and interacting with participants in their natural environment in an effort to understand the essence of an experience. Although the amount of time in which the research team had contact with each group of students was not as long-term, engaged, or sustained as is customary with phenomenological studies, the team engaged directly with each group of students with whom we met. Our goal was to describe and then thematically interpret the questions high school students had in the anticipation phase prior to transitioning to college. We engaged with students using a semi-structured protocol. Based on a review of the literature and pilot interaction with Montana high school students, we generated an initial set of seven categories as a starting point in our conversation. These categories were: Applying and Paying for College, Living Away From Home, Making Friends and Getting Involved, Finding Support and Resources, Succeeding in College Classes, Being Well and Staying Healthy, and Exploring Majors and Careers. The research team carefully considered the most interactive way to connect with high school students. We discussed the pros and cons of traditional focus groups and other qualitative data collection methods. Ultimately, we chose to gather data through a game because we believed it would generate the greatest amount of student interaction and inclusive participation.
Sample

During the spring of 2016 the research team met with primarily junior and senior high school students from five high schools and one homeschool group across central Montana. High schools were purposefully selected based on size, geography, and college-going resources. High schools varied in size from more than 1,800 students to extremely small (40 students in grades 9-12). Students ranged in aptitude and desired post-high school goals and included students who were enrolled in multiple AP courses and definitively college-bound to those unsure of their next steps after graduation. In most cases, we met with students during their regular class period, approximately 50 minutes. The number of students in a class varied from 30 students to 7. One small rural high school, which participates in the federally-funded GEAR UP program, chose our visit as a school assembly and we met with all grade 9-12 students for nearly two hours.

Data Collection

We began each class period with introductions and the purpose of our visit. We clearly articulated that we were not recruiters for our university nor were we visiting on behalf of the institution. We asked students to get in small groups of three or four. Groups of students were provided erasable markers and as many as eight colored laminated tiles, on which they generated the questions they had about attending college. If, for example, a group of students had a blue card, the corresponding general theme for the blue cards was “Succeeding in College Classes”; they wrote their questions on the cards increasing in point value from 100 to 500 similar to the well-known TV game, Jeopardy. As students completed their tiles, photographs were taken to capture the exact wording of the responses for later data analysis. Once we placed the tiles on a whiteboard by category horizontally, and increasing in point value vertically, the game began. One of the benefits of the Jeopardy game was that the questions were created with some level of anonymity. This allowed students to ask questions that they may have been uncomfortable asking in other settings. Because students worked in small groups to generate the questions, the game process normalized having questions and concerns about the transition to college.

The first group of students chose a theme or category and the point value for that particular question; for example, “Exploring Majors and Careers for 300.” The question was read aloud and the team had one minute to formulate an answer to that question. Following that team’s response, other groups were invited to comment and build upon the original answer. The research team facilitated the game, anonymously recorded all questions generated, and one or two team members took notes observing student behaviors and interactions. Following each school visit, the team created a working document to share observations and reflections until a debrief session could be held to discuss each session at the schools.
Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

We analyzed the data using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. The constant comparative method, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967 as cited in Boeije, 2002), utilizes the approach of comparing and contrasting collected data through the process of analysis, forming categories and summarizing content. Constant comparative method is used to develop concepts or categories from the data by coding or analyzing the data, comparing each unit to the previous one at the same time (Kolb, 2012). Given the goals of this project, conclusions were tested against an *a priori* framework (the initial seven categories), rather than developing an emerging formal grounded theory (Fram, 2013).

This type of qualitative analysis requires a systematic approach to the analysis to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. First, we ensured the validity of the data by photographing each question with a camera and accurately typing the document. From these data, we engaged in consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 2005). We worked in a group to analyze and code every question, and decisions were made by consensus. Such an approach ensures credibility of the emergent findings in that no fewer than three and often six people from differing personal and educational backgrounds had to agree on the appropriate code. Researcher bias is reduced through the consensual team approach to developing themes collaboratively (Hill et al., 2005).

Positionality

The research team consisted of the principal investigator, who is a faculty member in a higher education graduate program, three graduate students and two undergraduate students. Everyone on the research team had a personal or professional interest in the topic. For example, one of the undergraduate researchers had hosted scholarship search workshops in her home community. A graduate researcher shared she was first in her family to attend college and empathized with students preparing for this transition. As a team, we held one another accountable for recognizing our bias and perspectives as we engaged in the data analysis.

Results

The beginning categories were developed based on previous conversations with high school students, counselors, and a review of the literature. Through a Jeopardy-style game, we invited students to generate questions they had about transitioning to college within seven categories. Our data analysis used a constant comparative method and identified greater variation and complexity to the salient questions on the minds of high school students. Following is a review of the expanded ten categories with their sub-categories. We present the number of generated questions in parentheses and examples of verbatim questions in italics.
The initial category applying and paying for college evolved to college choice and preparation (12) with the questions generated having “process” or “how to” type emphases. Questions included: Is it better to go to college close to home or far away? What high school classes help with college? and How many back-up schools should I apply to? These are clearly questions germane to those who have not yet matriculated but who are thinking carefully about the college choice and preparation process.

Having generated questions about applying for college, students then begin to ruminate, and to some extent, fixate, on how they will pay for it. Financial literacy (80) was the category with the most questions branching into sub-topics of understanding federal financial aid, understanding loans, financial planning for tuition, fees, and books, and financial planning for living expenses. Questions included: How does the FAFSA actually work? How long does it fully take to pay off college loans? Where do I physically pay? and How do you pay bills? The focus on the cost of college manifested also in students’ questions about managing time (25), particularly with respect to studying and balancing academic and work obligations. Questions included: How do I manage my time around studying? Should I make personal deadlines for myself with assignments? How to balance classes and a job? and How many classes is “too many” classes?

Understandably, students had a number of questions with respect to living away from home as well as making friends and getting involved, as the familiar often changes dramatically when starting college. Living away from home (49) inspired questions aligning with functioning as an independent adult (What happens if there is an emergency and your family lives far away?), living situations (Do you have to live on campus if you do not live at home?), and separating while maintaining important family and friend relationships from home (How do I deal with homesickness? – six separate questions mentioned homesickness directly). Making friends and getting involved (50), drew questions oriented around establishing friendships (What is the best way to meet people? Where can I find lifelong friends?), finding and selecting extracurricular activities (What variety of clubs/activities are available? How do I find out about them?), and understanding sports and fraternity/sorority life (Where do I go to try to find out how to be on the football team? How do sororities and fraternities work?). Finally, students recognize that living in a new environment will call on them to develop communication and interpersonal skills (16) with roommates, peers, and faculty. Questions included: What do I do if I do not like my roommate? What if your roommate scares you? How do you communicate with your professors? and Can your professor be your friend?

Students know that college classes will be different than high school but they are not sure how. Succeeding in college classes (51) questions branched into sub-topics of understanding expectations and organization (How much work do we have to do out of class?), seeking help with coursework (Are the teachers available to help if we have questions? How accessible are tutors?), developing academic success strategies (What are good ways to take notes during lectures?), and attending/missing class (Do you need to go to every class to graduate?).

Being well and staying healthy (62) became the most complex category with
three main sub-categories: food and dining resources (What are on-campus food options for people with allergies or who want to eat healthy?), physical and mental wellness (How much sleep do I really need?), and services for maintaining wellness. The complexity of questions generated under services for maintaining wellness led to further delineation regarding how to find specific resources related to fitness (What kind of exercise facilities do you have?), medical (What kind of services does the Student Health Office offer?), and counseling and mental health (Where can you go if you have mental issues?). It is worth noting twice as many questions pertained to understanding the extent and scope of counseling and mental health services than medical.

Students seem to be inundated with the question, “what are you going to study?” It’s a harmless enough question posed by well-meaning family members at graduation parties but it comes with some level of anxiety for the college-bound student. One explanation for the number of questions in the exploring majors and careers (47) category may be that students feel they have to declare a major before they get to college. Students may not have the maturity or the resources to determine a career path at this point, as was evidenced by the sub-categories of exploring interest and vocation (What’s the best way to find subjects you may be naturally good at?) and choosing and changing a major, tinged with anxiety and worry (How many times are you allowed to change your major?). Students were also interested in the process of choosing a major (When should a person have declared a final major by?) and curious about opportunities provided for career exploration (Do colleges offer work study to explore majors?).

Finally, there were questions that didn’t seem to fit into any category or sub-topic and these were classified in general help (14). Questions included: What if you are a shy person? Where do you look for help? and How involved are community resource groups in college campuses?

Discussion

This study sought to understand the questions current Montana high school students had about going to college. The best way to find this information was to approach the students themselves as the experts (Paterson, 2015) and engage in a phenomenological study to describe the lived experience of high school students in the anticipatory time prior to transitioning to college. Approaching them in a game-focused manner allowed for a shared exchange of information and generated a robust dataset.

Over 400 questions demonstrated students’ thirst for college knowledge (Conley, 2008; Hooker & Brand, 2010) and awareness that transitioning from high school to college would require developing new skills to navigate the college milieu. If one envisions college readiness as a stool upon which students sit to draft their unique blueprint for college success (see Figure 1), high school counselors have done an admirable job advising in terms of academic preparation as well as college and financial aid application. Yet, a great opportunity lies in adjoining the ‘college knowledge’ leg to the stool. Developing stronger partnerships
between high school counselors and college recruitment, admission, orientation, and transition staff would provide a bridge for high school students, parents, and counselors to engage in the valuable conversation exposing the often hidden curriculum of higher education. High school counselors are already succeeding in providing application and enrollment information to students, and a partnership with college faculty and staff could aid in making the hidden curriculum explicit, providing students with valuable social and cultural capital to successfully transition to college.

The high school students in our focus groups had a number of questions regarding preparing for college and navigating the system as students. A major focus of concern included how to meet people with similar interests and make friends. This is a seemingly simple question, but an essential one, particularly for students from rural communities who may have grown up with the same friends all their lives. If new students do not meet others with common interests, feel accepted, and feel like they belong, they won’t stay in college (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009; Tinto, 2012). Moving from a town or city where a person has lived their entire life to a completely new place brings on stressors that students may have never experienced before. In addition, most have never lived with a stranger in a small dorm room, and high school students had many questions regarding roommate conflicts. Questions about how to declare a major and concern about changing majors were at the top of the list as well. Students conveyed the impression they must choose a major when they apply to college or soon thereafter. The anxiety with which students spoke about majors suggests a clear opportunity for career counselors and academic advisors from college campuses to partner with high school counselors around preparing students to be college and career ready.

The implications of our study are, in part, that colleges and high schools must work together to address the questions and concerns of students before they matriculate. Doing this would lessen the distance for students in remote towns, avert a large portion of anxiety, and make students more confident before attending college. Partnering so as to provide students with information on how to “do college,” what David Conley (2008, 2010) and others (see Tierney et al., 2013) refer to as “college knowledge”, could assist in a successful college transition. This is not a new or novel revelation (see Hooker & Brand, 2010; Oliva, 2008). The Association for the Study of Higher Education partnered with the Pell Institute on the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education for the express purpose of connecting researchers and practitioners in meaningful dialogue centered on college readiness and success (ASHE, 2016).

Such partnerships are aligned with the land grant mission of many universities across the United States. The Blueprints for Student Success-Montana project draws from the land grant pillar of community outreach and has collaborated on a local level across the state. First, we partnered with high school counselors to interact with their students, gathering data largely as a needs assessment. Second, one of the key messages we heard from high school counselors is that anything derived from the study’s findings could not require more of counselors’ limited time. Thus,
we have developed a multi-pronged approach using social media and technology to develop students’ college knowledge in a self-guided fashion.

First, we created a Facebook page, Blueprints for Student Success-Montana, and Twitter handle, @blueprints, where we post questions from the high school students with advice we gathered from current college students from across the state. Social media is a means to normalize the questions students have about the college transition. From our data collection, we also learned that college-bound high school students often don’t know which questions to ask of whom. To that end, we have partnered with undergraduate computer science students to demystify higher education’s organizational structure and language. They are doing this by providing parents, counselors, and students with an easy-to-navigate website, www.blueprintsforstudentsuccess.com, which provides an overview of the student support services common on college campuses, including a description of what the unit does and the questions appropriate to ask office staff. Finally, computer science students are developing an interactive computer game geared towards college-bound high school seniors. The objective of the game is to develop players’ college knowledge by inviting them to solve common challenges faced by students in their first year of college. These include handling roommate conflicts, seeking help with a class after receiving a lower than expected grade, exploring a major, and maintaining a sense of balance between academic responsibilities, social engagements, work, and health and well-being. The overall purpose of the game is to introduce college-bound students to higher education’s language, structure, culture, norms and expectations, and allow students to ‘go to college’ in a virtual space, letting them practice, fail, and learn how to connect with important people, programs, and services on campus that exist to support their success. Future research will investigate how partnerships between colleges and high schools foster greater college knowledge among students and how this knowledge manifests in college success.

Demonstrating a need for real-time resources for building college knowledge, and identifying a multi-pronged solution for accomplishing this task, this study provides a framework to inform the development of similar programs and partnerships. While most high school students may have an interest in becoming savvy about college, each region may have methods of delivery specific to their populations. Partnerships between university and high school educators that are research-based and result in context-informed practice are the key to preparing college ready students. An example is an outreach event developed in a partnership between Great Falls College, the College of Engineering at Montana State University, and a Great Falls School District in Montana. In 2016, a collaborative event ("Think Like An Engineer") was organized and hosted at Great Falls College with day-time activities for students considering engineering or computer science careers. As an added feature at this event, a Parent/Family session was hosted in the evening. Representatives from the College of Engineering Outreach Team and instructors from the Community College presented using interactive, hands-on methods. Participants were introduced to topics including STEM careers and majors, what successful college students do, and using a 2-year college as a
stepping stone to a Bachelor’s degree. Key to this event was the guest list, which consisted of high school students from Great Falls and surrounding communities within a 100-mile radius. Through the evolution of this event organizers have moved the date to autumn in order to avoid hazardous travel conditions and begin to reach out to financial aid representatives and the Cooperative Extension to broaden college readiness outreach, regardless of major interests, for more Montana youth.

The results of our study can be applied to the work of professionals in orientation and transition programs in a multitude of ways. An example involves high school students’ numerous questions around choosing a major in college. High school students’ questions are a reminder that clear information about exploring and choosing a program of study in college is an essential part of transition and first-year experience programming. For example, one author’s work in advising and student success programs involves informing students about advising pathways and degree programs during orientation on her campus. All academic advisors meet with students one-on-one for short advising sessions, something that tends to be conducted in small groups at most orientations. The one-on-one format allows for time to address worries and misconceptions about how majors and interest areas (used to place students with advising teams) are different, when students declare a major, and why the advising center asks students to clarify their interests while at the same time reassuring students they have time and space for exploration. Questions and concerns about financial aid was another category we found from our research. All colleges provide new students with information on the FAFSA and financial aid, but the results of the current study indicate a need for much more detailed information, beginning in high school and continuing into the transition-to-college period. Financial literacy programs are becoming more common at the college level, but the results of our study indicate a need for financial literacy to be integrated into multiple levels of orientation and transition programming.

Our results speak to the need for better collaboration not only between high schools and colleges, but also between Admissions and First-Year Experience (FYE) and Transition programming staff in colleges. The admissions functions and FYE programs may be organizationally separate in postsecondary education, and yet both require engaging with prospective and new students who have numerous questions and anxieties about college. In addition, collaborations with advising functions would be useful as well, as advisors are typically well-versed in the major choice process. The sharing of college knowledge could begin during admissions visits to high schools. The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) can be used to guide these collaborations between admissions and FYE/transition programs and advising. For example, for both admissions and orientation programs, CAS states that they must contribute to:

Student’s formal education, which includes the curriculum and the co-curriculum, student progression and timely completion of educational goals, preparation of students for their careers, citizenship and lives, student learning and development (2015, p. 368 and 463).
These standards indicate that admissions and orientation can and should contribute to student’s formal education, which includes having the college knowledge necessary to realize educational goals and prepare for careers and citizenship.

This study adds to the literature on rural students’ understanding of the transition to college by expanding the inquiry to the Mountain West region. We provide multiple examples of how research findings have manifested in partnerships to address the unique challenges of providing college readiness tools and programming in a frontier state. It is our hope that this research-to-practice partnership, a staple in K-12 education, becomes the norm in higher education as well. Recruitment, Admissions, Orientation, Transition, and Retention staff members are well-positioned to provide critical leadership in this regard.

In conclusion, it is not for lack of academic aspiration or ability but rather a lack of information and college-going knowledge that reinforces the barrier of access to higher education for many rural students. Building relationships and partnerships linking educational resources to assist rural students in successful college application, matriculation and degree completion can close the seemingly great divide in a frontier state.

**FIGURE 1**

**College Readiness Stool**

![College Readiness Stool Diagram](image)
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The Relationship Between Students’ Family Communication, Transition Efficacy, and Communication Skill

Kristina M. Scharp, Elizabeth Dorrance Hall, Matthew Sanders, and Mitchell Colver

This study explores the relationships between a students’ family communication environment and factors that facilitate a successful transition into higher education. Results from 423 first-year students suggest that coming from a family that encourages open communication is related to how confident they feel about their academic performance, growing up, and managing their personal finances (i.e., transition efficacy). Coming from a family that celebrates communication is also related to the degree to which students are skilled at talking with others. Taken together, transition efficacy and communication skill are important factors for student success. Practical implications of this study are promising for both student affairs professionals and family members who want to help their students succeed.

Abstract

Understanding students’ ability to transition successfully to college is one of the most pressing concerns for universities (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). The inability for students to transition with ease might be one reason why 30% of students drop out of college after their first year (Beckstead, 2017) and only 65% of the 21 million undergraduate students in the United States graduate within six years (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2015). From a different perspective, that means that almost 9.5 million students will not graduate, costing institutions of higher learning approximately 16.5 billion dollars over a six-year period (Raisman, 2013). Despite what we know about the experiences of college students during the transition, Cole, Kennedy and Ben-Avie (2009) argue that universities know little about how students’ family environments relate to their ability to transition successfully. According to Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005), successful transition is not only defined by retention but also factors such as making academic and intellectual progress, developing into an adult, and establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the present study, framed in family communication patterns theory (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) illuminates the
relationships between students’ family communication environments and their transition efficacy (i.e., academic ability, growing up, and financial management) and communication skill. This study contributes by identifying the relationships among transition success factors and points to areas that student affairs professionals and family members can focus on to help students succeed. Toward these goals, we begin by presenting our theoretical framework.

**Family Communication Patterns Theory**

Family communication patterns theory (FCP) was first introduced by McLeod and Chaffee (1972), was later adapted in 1990 by Ritchie and Fitzpatrick, and was formally articulated by Koerner and Fitzpatrick in 2002. The theory is primarily used by communication studies scholars interested in how a family’s communication environment predicts a variety of outcomes. FCP suggests that families communicate in fairly predictable ways that get reinforced through the process of social learning (see Kunkel, Hummert, & Dennis, 2008). According to Kunkel and her colleagues (2008), social learning is the process by which children learn particular behaviors, beliefs, and values from their parents’ teaching and modeling of those behaviors/attitudes/values.

According to FCP, two factors determine a family’s communication environment: conversation orientation and conformity orientation. These two orientations serve as socialization mechanisms for children. Specifically, conversation orientation refers to the extent to which families encourage open communication. Thus, conversation orientation not only encompasses topic breadth but also topic depth. To date, research suggests that students who come from high conversation oriented families are generally more efficacious (Curran & Allen, 2016), more likely to discuss sensitive topics (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998), and less likely to exhibit avoidant behavior (Schrodt, Ledbetter, & Ohrt, 2007). Put simply, children from high conversation oriented families feel free to ask their parents questions even when the topics are uncomfortable or emotionally charged, which often leads to positive outcomes (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Families who are high in conformity orientation value homogenous attitudes, beliefs, and values. These families avoid conflict when possible and do not emphasize members’ individuality. Existing research suggests that high conformity works differently than conversation and often yields very mixed results depending on the context.

Not only does a family’s communication environment influence children while they are in the home, but FCP theory also posits that families influence children’s behaviors even after they leave home by shaping their perceptions of their social environment and influencing the development of protective traits (e.g., communication skills) that can help them cope with stressors (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Koerner & Schrodt, 2014). Specifically, researchers have begun to use FCP to explore how college students cope with a variety of stressors. For example, Dorrance Hall and her colleagues (2016) used FCP to examine U.S and Belgian student experiences of stress and loneliness (Dorrance Hall et al., 2016).
They found that parental advice mediated the relationship between conversation orientation and self-efficacy and loneliness in U.S students. Indeed, students who perceive that their parents give good advice are more likely to be confident and less likely to be lonely. For Belgian students, high conformity proved to be a risk factor which was related to increased stress and more loneliness. High and Scharp (2015) also used FCP to determine how motivated and able students were to seek support when they experienced moderate to severe problems at college. They found that high conversation orientation had a positive indirect effect on seeking supportive communication through ability and motivation. Put simply, ability and motivation mediated the relationship between conversation orientation and direct support seeking. Results also indicated that motivation also mediated the relationship between conformity orientation and support seeking. Several of these indirect effects were significant for only women. Thus, unlike for Belgian students, high conformity yielded better outcomes for students. Because FCP has such good explanatory power pertaining to students at college, it is likely that FCP factors will also shed light on the transition experience.

Factors that Influence Successful Transition

Transition Efficacy

According to a recent study, college students have a variety of concerns in their first year of college about their academic achievement (i.e., tests/homework, managing time), their independence (i.e., detaching from their legal guardians, not living at home, having to grow up, taking on more responsibility), and their finances (i.e., paying for school, employment status, paying for housing, financial aid; Dorrance Hall et al., 2017). These concerns are important considering Raisman (2013) suggests that universities could improve their retention rates by up to 84% if they paid more attention to the concerns that students have while at college.

But concerns are only one part of the equation; researchers have established that student success also depends on their level of confidence in themselves (Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005). Specifically, Zajacova and her colleagues (2005) found that self-efficacy was linked to higher first-year college GPAs, number of accumulated credits, and college retention after the first year. High self-efficacy has been linked to students who are better able to complete educational requirements, earn higher grades, remain engaged, and persist until graduation compared to students with lower self-efficacy (Finn, 1993; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1984; Lucio, Rapp-Paglicci, & Rowe, 2011). Indeed, a study by Fenning and May (2013) found that self-efficacy was the best predictor of high school GPA and learning self-efficacy was the best predictor of current GPA. Thus, self-efficacy is one of the most important determinants of success at institutes of higher learning.

While self-efficacy is a global confidence in one’s self, we argue that students might vary in their degree of confidence surrounding the specific concerns they
identify as part of the transition to college (Dorrance Hall et al., 2017). Indeed, as indicated by the Fenning and May (2013) study, learning self-efficacy predicted GPA better than global self-efficacy. Thus, we define transition efficacy as the level of confidence students feel about achieving their academic goals, growing up, and managing their finances. Because transition efficacy is the confidence students have to address three interrelated concerns, we pose our first hypothesis:

H1: Academic, growing up, and financial efficacy will be positively associated with one another.

Communication Skill

Although efficacy is important in determining student success, simply having confidence might not guarantee success. Hsieh and her colleagues (2007) contend that self-efficacy influences student success in three ways: (1) self-efficacy influences students’ motivation to develop and improve their ability, (2) efficacious students have a higher desire to demonstrate their ability, and (3) efficacious students can remain resilient when confronted with difficult tasks. Put simply, it is not only important that students have confidence, it is also important that students have ability, or in this case, the communication skill to transition successfully.

Possessing the ability to communicate with others is an essential skill during the transition to college. Existing research on interpersonal communication skill suggests that the stress which students experience surrounding real or anticipated communication with others serves as a barrier to students’ leadership, adaptability, and multicultural appreciation (Blume, Baldwin, & Ryan, 2013). A study by Hawken, Duran, and Kelly (1991) found that communication competence was positively linked with roommate rapport and GPA whereas it was negatively related to loneliness. Students report that it would be problematic if they were unable to find a close group of friends and/or unable to get along with their roommates (Dorrance Hall et al., 2017). Furthermore, communication skills might be especially important for students who need to reach out to professors or academic affairs professionals to address issues like academic performance or financial aid respectively. This might be one reason that research suggests that students who have higher communication skill also have higher academic achievements and are less likely to drop out over a four-year period compared with students who are more apprehensive about their communication abilities (Ericson & Gardner, 1992; McGroskey & Andersen, 1976).

In sum, both transition efficacy and communication skill might independently influence a students’ ability to transition to college successfully. Yet, as Hsieh and her colleagues (2007) point out, people with high efficacy often have the motivation to improve their skill as well as the desire to demonstrate it. With this relationship in mind, we pose the second part to our first hypothesis:

H2: Transition efficacy (i.e., academic, growing up, and financial efficacy) will be positively associated with communication skill.
Proposed Relationships between Family Communication Factors and Transition Factors

FCP posits that a family’s communication environment influences attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that might help a student transition successfully. Research suggests that families who promote an open communication environment have globally better outcomes (Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008). For example, existing studies report that students who come from families with a higher conversation orientation perceive more support from their families, are more resilient when dealing with college stressors, and are more likely to perceive that the transition to college will help them grow (Dorrance Hall & Scharp, 2018). Specifically, being raised in a high conversation orientation family has also been found to be associated with higher self-efficacy with regards to scholastic achievement (Dorrance Hall et al., 2016). Kindergarten through college-aged students who came from families with higher conversation orientations also felt generally less apprehensive about communicating (Elwood & Schrader, 1998). This might come as no surprise considering family members who are high in conversation orientation are more likely to discuss sensitive topics and personal matters (Booth-Butterfield & Sidelinger, 1998; Huang, 1999). Based on the existing research we pose the following two hypotheses:

H3: Conversation will be positively associated with transition efficacy.

H4: Conversation will be positively associated with communication skill.

Whereas conversation orientation globally yields positive implications, existing research suggests that conformity orientation is less consistent (Schrodt et al., 2008). Yet, given the context of the study, we base our last two hypotheses on the research suggesting conformity might not encourage feelings of efficacy or foster communication skill. For example, a recent study suggests that students who come from high conformity families are less resilient when they are forced to face challenges (Dorrance Hall et al., 2017). Dorrance Hall et al. (2016) found that Belgian students from high conformity families experienced more stress about college. Research also suggests that when coming from a family with high conformity, individuals perceive less social support and are less likely to maintain their friendships (Koerner & Maki, 2004; Ledbetter, 2009). Furthermore, Avtgis (1999) found that people who grew up in families that focus on strict norms, rules, and a culture of homogeneity limit the expression of personal needs rather than encouraging communication skills. This corresponds to research conducted by Ledbetter (2009) who found that children who grow up in high conformity families are encouraged less to develop their skills, in particular the skill to adapt to new situations. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H5: Conformity will be negatively associated with transition efficacy.
H6: Conformity will be negatively associated with communication skill.

**Method**

**Participants**

Participants included 138 male (31.7%) and 284 female (65.1%) first-year students (total $N = 423$). One participant reported “other” sex (.2%). Most participants were White ($n = 392, 89.9%$), 12 were Hispanic (2.8%), 6 were African American (1.4%), 5 were Asian/Pacific Islander (1.1%), and 8 participants selected other or chose not to disclose their racial/ethnic background. Most participants were not the first to attend college in their family ($n = 390, 89.4%$) but 32 participants were first-generation students (7.3%).

In order to collect data about their family communication patterns, students were asked to complete an online survey as part of signing up for first-year student orientation between March and June before they started their first year of college at a large university in the Western United States. Students were surveyed again in November during their first semester of college to assess transition efficacy and skills. Over 2,000 students completed the Time 1 survey, but only 423 completed the survey at both Time 1 and 2. Only those 423 students are reported on in the present study. Students were compensated with a $5 Amazon gift card for completing the survey at Time 2.

**Measures**

**Family Communication Patterns**

Students’ reported family conversation and conformity orientations were measured at Time 1 using the Revised Family Communication Patterns Scale (RFCP-SF; Wilson, Chernichky, Wilkum, & Owlett, 2014). Conversation orientation was measured using six items from the original RFCP (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990). Example conversation orientation items include: “I can tell my parents almost anything,” and “I really enjoy talking to my parents, even when we disagree.” Conformity orientation was also measured using six items from the original RFCP. Example conformity orientation items include: “My parents feel it is important to be the boss,” and “My parents often say something like ‘my ideas are right and you should not question them.’” All items were measured with a Likert-type scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. The conversation orientation scale was reliable ($M = 3.57, SD = .89, \alpha = .90$), as was the conformity orientation scale ($M = 2.59, SD = .75, \alpha = .814$).

**Transition Efficacy**

Students reported their confidence in three areas of the transition to college:
academics, growing up, and finances. Eighteen items from existing measures on college self-efficacy (Zajacova et al., 2005) were used to assess academic efficacy. Example items included asking the students how confident they were in their ability to “motivate yourself to do schoolwork,” “find time to study,” and “finish homework assignments by deadlines.” This scale ranged from 0-100 where higher scores indicated more academic efficacy ($M = 72.89$, $SD = 13.96$, $\alpha = .913$). A growing up efficacy scale was created to measure student confidence about living on their own and “growing up and becoming an adult.” This reliable scale consisted of four items and ranged from 0-100 where higher scores indicated more growing up efficacy ($M = 78.22$, $SD = 17.14$, $\alpha = .803$). A three-item financial efficacy scale was created to measure confidence about paying for college and other costs associated with attending college. For example, questions asked how confident students were about: “Paying for college tuition,” and “Finding scholarships to lower the cost of tuition.” This reliable scale ranged from 0-100 where higher scores indicated more financial efficacy ($M = 61.02$, $SD = 24.27$, $\alpha = .830$).

Communication Skill

Fourteen items from Wrench, Brogan, McCroskey, and Jowi’s (2008) scale were used to assess communication skill at Time 2. All questions were asked on a five point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Example items include: “I always feel anxious in social situations,” and “social interaction is the best part of my day” (reverse coded). Seven items total were reverse coded. Scores were averaged to create a composite variable where higher values indicate more communication skill ($M = 3.30$, $SD = .79$). The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .94$).

Data Analysis

Composite variables were created for each scale detailed above. Zero-order bivariate correlations were then run among variables to test all hypotheses. Table 1 contains the correlation results.

Results

The three types of efficacy (i.e., academic, growing up, and financial) were highly correlated with one another (see Table 1). This indicates that as efficacy in one area increases, efficacy in the other two areas increases as well (H1). Similarly, as communication skill increases, academic, growing up, and financial efficacy all increase (H2), though the correlations between communication skill and the three types of efficacy were smaller than the correlations among the three types of efficacies. H1 and H2 were supported.

Conversation orientation at Time 1 was positively associated with transition efficacy (i.e., academic efficacy, growing up efficacy, and financial efficacy)
and communication skill at Time 2. This means that students who come from families that value open conversation about a variety of topics tend to have more confidence in their abilities to complete schoolwork, manage their time, take on adult roles, and pay for college (H3). As predicted by H4, students also tended to have more communication skill and less anxiety in social situations. As such, H3 and H4 were supported.

Conformity orientation at Time 1 was not associated with any of the adjustment outcomes at Time 2. Therefore, H5 and H6 were not supported.

### TABLE 1

**Correlation matrix**

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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Conformity</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Academic Efficacy</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Growing Up Efficacy</td>
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<td>-.08</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Financial Efficacy</td>
<td>.11*</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.55**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Communication Skill</td>
<td>.10*</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-</td>
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### Discussion

The goal of this research was to understand the associations between family communication environments (i.e., conversation and conformity orientation) and factors important for students’ successful transition to college. As expected, growing up in a family marked by high conversation orientation was positively associated with transition efficacy including academic, growing up, and financial self-efficacy. Students from high conversation orientation families also reported higher communication skill during the first semester of college. This means that families who talk often, and about a wide variety of topics, tend to have children who feel confident in their ability to complete their schoolwork, participate in class, take on grown-up tasks on their own, and pay for their tuition through work or scholarships. These families also have children who feel confident in social situations and are likely good at making friends and establishing connections with their professors, classmates, and coworkers.

Interestingly, growing up in a family that places high value on homogeneity of attitudes, values, and beliefs (i.e., conformity orientation) was not associated with transition efficacy or communication skill. This means that unlike we predicted, conformity orientation does not have negative effects on student efficacy, but instead seems to play little to no role in students’ confidence in their academic,
growing up, or financial abilities or their actual communication ability. These results echo the body of FCP literature that suggests that conformity orientation matters in some contexts and is less important in others (Schrodt et al., 2008).

Finally, students who reported high levels of communication skill also tended to report higher levels of efficacy in all areas. This means that increasing transition efficacy or communication skill can make a big difference for students. In light of results such as these, we present practical implications for student affairs professionals and family members seeking to support transitioning students, but first we address the limitations of our study.

Limitations

This longitudinal study captures a representative sample of a single large university in the United States, which is at once a strength and limitation. Future researchers should aim to expand these findings to other campuses that range in size, diversity of the student population, and geographic location (both domestic and international). It is also possible that students who attend commuter colleges have different experiences that require more or less transition efficacy and communication skill. Furthermore, students who come from diverse socioeconomic statuses might feel more or less efficacious about their transition.

Limitations also exist in reference to the data analysis. The three types of efficacy were correlated, indicating that either they move together or they are measuring the same construct. Theoretically we believe they are distinct due to qualitative differences in the items (e.g., experiencing financial challenges is not the same as social challenges). In the future, researchers should continue to explore how these three areas of efficacy are related for students going through the transition to college. Finally, many survey items were chosen from pre-existing scales, but the scales were not used in full due to time restrictions of the survey. Other items were created for this study. The findings presented here should be interpreted with these limitations in mind. Although limitations exist, we argue that better understanding a student’s communication environment is valuable and can inform practical applications.

Practical Applications

Practical Implications for Student Retention and Transition Professionals

Despite the limited opportunities that student affairs professionals might have in intervening with potential students as they grow up, results from the present study suggest that there are many opportunities to help students improve their confidence and their communication skills. Results from this study suggest, for example, that the types of efficacy are related, even if academic performance, growing up, and finances seem like unrelated concerns. In addition, we contend
that when one of these types of efficacy goes up, then the rest do as well, although it is possible that transition efficacy measures the same construct (see limitations). Nevertheless, our findings suggest that a workshop on managing personal finances might help students feel more confident overall, thereby increasing their academic performance and their ability to function independently. We also know that communication skill is something that can be taught, as evidenced by the thousands of interpersonal communication courses taught across the nation. If available, these instructors might be able to partner with student affairs to put on a workshop during orientation to help students communicate with a variety of audiences more effectively.

Practical Implications for Parents

Although family communication orientations are often considered relatively enduring, the transition to college might mark an opportunity to make subtle changes where parents can help their child thrive. For example, as students move away from home and become more autonomous, parents might be able to change the extent they require their students’ to adhere to their beliefs and values. If that is untenable, parents might at least encourage their children to talk to them about the new beliefs and attitudes they encounter. They might also signal to their children that new topics such as personal finances are available for discussion. Based on the results from this study, this not only benefits students who might need to reach out to their parents for help but also parents who now have to rely on their children’s disclosures to learn about information such as their academic performance.

In addition to the interventions student affairs professionals might implement to improve students’ communication skills and transition efficacy, they might also have the opportunity to help educate parents to support their child through the transition. Nevertheless, student affairs professionals might talk to parents during orientation about ways they can support their children through the transition. For example, they might help parents see the benefits of having an open communication environment where students are allowed to bring up a variety of uncomfortable topics.

Taken together, results from this longitudinal study suggest that students’ communication environment when they grow up can influence factors that contribute to a successful transition to college. In light of these findings, practical applications exist that could help parents and student affairs professionals facilitate a successful college transition.
References


Evaluating Empowerment Language During the First-Year Student Transition

Kathryn B. Wilhite

A primary function of orientation programming is to help students begin their adjustment by seeing themselves as a student at the institution; communication plays a significant role in achieving the goal. In consideration of foundational knowledge about adjustment and language, this study evaluates how well messages to incoming students empower their success by defining the institutional environment and the student role within the environment. Critical findings for the transition field relate to word choices and their influence on the perception of orientation, the potential for orientation to design meaningful communication experiences, and ways empowerment strategies might help with transitions.

Transition, Language, and Adjustment

The task of communicating with incoming students is a dual responsibility in which orientation programs serve both recruitment and retention functions (Hossler & Anderson, 2005). The critical nature of the communications that happen from acceptance through attendance merit evaluation. It is for this reason that many admissions offices conduct analyses of the frequency and mode of their communication (Supiano, 2016). Colleges and universities communicate with incoming students across a dynamic landscape of modalities; technology plays an adapting role due to the nature of the evolution of students' technological familiarity and preferences (Junco, 2005).

These considerations, however, neglect to examine the actual messages of communication pieces. In recognition of the power of language (Foucault, 1972) and the ways balancing power in the classroom can engage participation (Weimer, 2013), there is value in evaluating what is said, not just the mode. College student adjustment relates to institutional environment (Strange & Banning, 2015; Astin, 1991). This study aims to determine if there is a way to measure the empowerment strategies in the language of communication pieces and what relationship those strategies have with student adjustment.

Theoretical Framework

Student Adjustment

Orientation is an opportunity for students to develop a level of comfort with
the institutional environment and understand the space they will occupy. Astin’s (1991) Input-Environment-Outcomes (I-E-O) Model provides a framework because transition experiences are a direct intervention related to retention that is meant to expose students to the environment. Orientation programs attempt to assist the adjustment process by removing barriers, meeting milestones, and achieving a level of comfort at the institution (Hossler & Anderson, 2005).

Communication

Astin’s (1991) input factor, for the purposes of this study, is the language context that a student brings to the lexicon of higher education. Ogden and Richards’ (1989) Symbol-Referent model suggests that meaning is made by the recipient as much as the sender. Burke (1966) asserts that lived experiences influence the lens which an individual brings to the conversation. Therefore, experiences, or Astin’s (1991) inputs, influence the recipient’s interpretation of messages.

Empowerment Strategies

Foucault (1972) asserts that word choice, statements, and the access required to understand can inherently restrict or distribute power. He suggests including approaches to language that consider the audience, whether privileged knowledge is necessary, and whether recipients receive an invitation to participate (Foucault, 1972). Weimer (2013) has explored empowerment strategies in the college classroom; these strategies suggest that students thrive when they have choices, motivation, and autonomy to interact with knowledge through technology (Weimer, 2013).

Methods

The purpose of this qualitative inductive analysis is to identify a way to measure empowerment language and determine whether empowerment messaging appears in communications. A rubric, developed for the study, uses Foucault’s conceptions of language and power and Weimer’s strategies for balancing power in the classroom. The rubric (Figure 1) consists of ten categories, which rank words, phrases, and sentences on a ten-point scale from excellent to poor.

The study defines the scope of communications as those provided, for the timespan of acceptance to attendance, to all incoming, first-year students for autumn 2016 at a large, public, four-year university in the southeastern United States. Documents include letters, emails, online landing pages, video transcripts, and phone call scripts. The 19 documents meeting the criteria originated from six functional areas at the institution: admissions, orientation, financial aid, the Bursar’s office, housing, and the department of First-Year and Transition Studies, which manages first-year seminars and learning communities.
Analysis of the 19 documents viewed them as one comprehensive communication from the institution, in consideration of the environment factor of Astin's (1991) model. Each document review consisted solely of the language; additional communication elements, such as visual or graphic items, were excluded from analysis. Documents were reviewed against the rubric for performance in each category and a word count analysis looked for repetition, consistency, and overall word usage throughout the 19 documents.

Data

Four primary themes and one emerging theme are evident through this study. They relate to word choices, empowerment strategies, and communication experiences.

The two themes related to the selection of words and phrases are as follows:
1. Language balance is found through the articulation of the meaning of terms as related to the student.
2. Word choice matters.

Language balance involves defining terms as what they are, what they do, and what they say.

Language balance is achieved when terms are specifically defined within the context of the specific institutional environment and also identify the relationship between an individual student and the term itself. Next, word choice was significant in each document because it defines communication intent and determines how appropriate, accessible, and restricted the information within the document is. More importantly, the word choice of one document influences the performance of word choices throughout the rest of the documents. For example, the word “register” was used 32 times. The majority of these uses represented the activity of enrolling in courses, but six of the uses were related to signing up to attend an event. “Orientation,” used 60 times, places an emphasis on the event. In addition, the institution contradicted itself in naming the population, calling them “freshman” twice and “first-year students” 11 times.

The two themes related to empowerment strategies are as follows:
3. Ignoring timing and refusing further discourse builds process over relationship.
4. Empowerment thrives when choice includes participation and motivation.

The documents offered the locus of control to the recipient when the language acknowledged the timing of the message and explicitly explained when and how to interact. In some cases, recipients received an invitation to interact only if they had questions. In more empowering cases, an identified opportunity to ask questions and present plans at a very specific time was articulated. The messages were most empowering when they clearly outlined in an accessible way the choices a student
might make and explained the reasons for making those choices, followed by explicit directions for action.

The final, and emerging, theme is as follows:

5. Communication experience matters.

This emerging theme is of particular importance to orientation programs. It is emerging because it was only present in seven video transcripts that are part of a pre-orientation digital experience. As a unit, the transcripts performed better on the rubric than the documents performed as a whole. The rankings of excellent and satisfactory were due to consistent word choices and emphasis on the environment through language balance, and also the innovative use of technology encouraging participation. Statements connected recipients to links, to other videos, or to interest forms directly. There is some indication that the intentional creation of this experience allowed empowerment strategies and empowerment language to peak.

Discussion

As a functional area on campus that brings the university together, orientation and transition departments are positioned to guide a conversation about empowerment messaging. In particular, these departments often create the communications, or the arena for the communications, that incoming students receive.

Orientation programs can construct communication pieces that, using language balance, help students begin to define the institutional environment, their role within it, and the experiences they will have before and after enrollment. Additionally, orientation can host conversations about appropriate terms and phrases, as well as ways to define the institution and students themselves. Orientation can also begin a conversation about the institutional lexicon and whether the usage of words is delivering contradictory, confusing, or over-emphasized messages. In particular, this study exposed the potential misconception that overemphasis of a program or service might create for incoming students. There is an opportunity to discuss how word and phrase choices with incoming students creates empowerment, because consistent terms allow recipients to define and therefore establish their own meaning.

The pre-orientation and orientation experience is ripe with decisions for students to make. Designing opportunities for choice using empowerment messaging gives recipients research-based merit for choices, as well as explicit directions for how to make choices. Such messaging also clarifies when they can discuss their choices with institutional professionals. Orientation often hosts the opportunities for interaction, and by explicitly describing how decision-making will occur at orientation, the strategy grants access and accountability to the student for selection.

Orientation and transition departments can explore the emerging theme of communication experience. If orientation programs intentionally weave together messages from different departments in ways that are meant to be integrated,
this may naturally open up opportunities that allow empowerment strategies to be employed. The rubric is available to assist the design of orientation-specific communication, and also to facilitate an exploration of the overall institutional message for students who are in the process of enrolling.

**Conclusion**

More exploration is necessary to further understand the impact of language on students as they are transitioning, and there is great potential in understanding the way language performs. Institutions invest in the development and design of interventions to assist students in their adjustment, so there is value in investing time in delivering messaging that is related to the environment. This is especially true if doing so can lead to advanced adjustment that might empower students to make decisions. Furthermore, the opportunity exists to define the institution through the creation of institutional lexicons that clarify the institutional environment and also offer students, with their varied context inputs, an opportunity to define themselves.

**FIGURE 1**

**Wilhite’s Rubric for Evaluating Language in First-Year Communication**

Developed using the theoretical knowledge of Foucault’s Discursive Formations and Weimer’s Balance of Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluations of Language</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Unsatisfactory</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience appropriate language</td>
<td>Language used is student-centered (Foucault)</td>
<td>Language used is mostly student-centered</td>
<td>It is unclear who the audience is</td>
<td>Language used is rarely student-centered</td>
<td>Language used is never student-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication intent is clear</td>
<td>Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of statements, concepts, and choices (Foucault)</td>
<td>Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of some statements, concepts, and choices</td>
<td>Evidence of descriptive efficacy is unclear</td>
<td>Descriptive efficacy is implied but not clearly evident</td>
<td>Descriptive efficacy is not present in the communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language choice</td>
<td>Information is presented using language that is developed, united, accessible, and presented without restriction (Foucault)</td>
<td>Information is presented using some developed, united, accessible, and unrestricted language</td>
<td>Information is presented using language that is neither developed or incomplete, united or divided, accessible or exclusive,</td>
<td>Information is presented using some language that is incomplete, divided, exclusive, or restricted</td>
<td>Information is presented using language that is incomplete, divided, exclusive, and restricted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1This rubric was created as an instrument for Kathryn Wilhite’s qualitative thesis “An Exploratory Study of the Impact of Language on the Transition and Success of Students in Their First College Year”


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Restricted or Unrestricted</th>
<th>Language Focus is Mostly on What It Says, with Limited Exploration of What It Is or What It Does</th>
<th>Language Focus is Entirely on What It Says</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language balance</strong></td>
<td>Balance exists in the language between what it is, what it does, and what it says (Foucault)</td>
<td>Language has elements of what it is and/or what it does</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing</strong></td>
<td>Acknowledgement of timing of statements is evident as part of an ongoing exchange that does not constitute a terminal stage of discourse (Foucault &amp; Weimer)</td>
<td>Timing is not clearly acknowledged and continuation of discourse is unknown</td>
<td>Timing is ignored and continuation of discourse is either not acknowledged or discouraged; terminal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discourse</strong></td>
<td>Language used invites discourse, seeks to take advantage of interaction, and remains within the dimension of discourse (Foucault &amp; Weimer)</td>
<td>Language does not explicitly seek to invite further discourse or encourage further interaction but is open to further interaction</td>
<td>Language is not discursive, no intent for discourse or interaction is involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication experience</strong></td>
<td>Intentional design of a communication experience is evident and explicit (Weimer)</td>
<td>Intentional design of a communication experience is evident but not explicit</td>
<td>Evidence and statement of a communication experience are lacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language provides choice</strong></td>
<td>Information is designed to be broad with opportunities for individuals to choose from supplementary material for increased knowledge; technology is employed to assist with knowledge access (Weimer)</td>
<td>Information is fairly broad but occasionally specific and detailed; supplementary information is provided and technology is employed for some access</td>
<td>Information covers mostly specific and detailed topics; no supplementary information is provided OR that information does not effectively employ technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language invokes participation</strong></td>
<td>Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in decisions;</td>
<td>Recipients are presented with choices and it is unclear where those choices</td>
<td>Recipients are provided with no choices; all steps are mandated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recipients are presented with choices and it is unclear where those choices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 1 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language provides motivation</th>
<th>Communication encourages and engages recipients with opportunities to develop college transition skills (Weimer)</th>
<th>Communication encourages recipients to develop college transition skills (Weimer)</th>
<th>Communication neither encourages nor discourages recipients to develop college transition skills (Weimer)</th>
<th>Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills and undermines ones connection to their own transition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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References


Are we ready to welcome the next generation of college students onto our campuses? Ready or not, Generation Z has arrived! Who are these students, and what does this mean for our work? *Generation Z Goes to College* is a great read for all higher education professionals interested in understanding how this generation of college students differs from previous generations. Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace’s book provides faculty, student affairs staff, and higher education administrators alike with valuable insight into these students’ learning styles and preferences. This information can assist professionals by providing both individual and institutional approaches to creating learning environments that will support the success of these students.

Seemiller and Grace (2016) base their book on the findings from their 2014 study of over one thousand Gen Z students from fifteen institutions. They also cite over three hundred additional sources ranging from market research and social science research to Pugh data and CIRP survey responses. The authors also include an overview of the study’s methodological details, data analysis, and limitations; however, the true focus of the book is their translation of the data outlining the implications for curriculum development, pedagogical practice, and co-curricular programming.

The authors begin by providing a helpful review of the previous generations (i.e., Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y, also known as “Millennials”), before fully exploring the profile of Generation Z. The review helps to create context in which to understand both the similarities and differences of this next generation of college students.

Students classified as Generation Z were born between 1995 and 2000. According to the authors, not only are Gen Z students driven by different learning preferences and motivating factors, but their learning styles, academic skill sets, social practices, and social concerns are quite different than those of previous generations. The authors dedicate chapters for sharing and highlighting the characteristics of this generation, their beliefs and perspectives, communication preferences, social media usage, relationships, general cares and concerns, engagement and social concerns, and leadership styles and capacities, leaving the
last two chapters to address how to maximize their learning and effectively work with them.

This book was informative and thought-provoking. As a Generation Xer, a student affairs professional with over twenty years of experience, a current doctoral student in educational leadership, and a mother of a Gen Z teenage son in the midst of the college search, I found that numerous aspects of the Gen Z profile resonated with and had profound impact on each of these identities. The authors not only paint a clear picture of the differences between Millennials and Gen Zers, but they also highlight the importance of the implications of these differences, making it a great choice for higher education administrators and faculty of all disciplines.

For faculty, the authors share their recommendations to support the hard work of designing and teaching courses that can engage, challenge, develop, and support Gen Z students. Faculty will find the chapters on communication platforms and preferences particularly helpful. Despite a lifestyle of constant connectivity, Seemiller and Grace (2016) found that “83 percent of Generation Z students prefer face-to-face communication because it allows them to connect better and read the other person” (p. 61). This could mean that faculty might see a resurgence in office hour usage that has declined with Millennials. In addition, the maximizing learning chapter is a must-read for all faculty. The authors share academic-focused points, such as how “more than 70 percent [of Gen Zers] think it is important to be able to design and build their own course of study or major” (p. 185) and how “they prefer to learn on their own time and in their own way” (p. 185). This supports the assertion of Hainline, Gaines, Feather, Padilla, & Terry (2010) that faculty will “have to abandon their ‘same old, same old’ mentality and approaches” (p. 8). This book is the perfect choice for a faculty development workshop for both new and seasoned faculty. According to Hainline et al. (2010), “institutions need to provide training in new teaching pedagogies, and faculty should be willing to learn and use these methods” (p. 8). Such a learning opportunity would increase the generalized understanding of Generation Z student learning styles, preferred learning environments, academic motivations, and their approach to vocational discernment.

For administrators, the chapters on cares and concerns and communication platforms and preferences are quite helpful. These students have grown up in the midst of the economic downturn. Although this generation believes “that education is the foundations for individual success and societal prosperity” (p. 98), the “anxiety over being able to afford a college education is forefront on the minds of these students” (p. 98). Moreover, these students worry about post-college employment. They have witnessed parents and other loved ones lose their jobs and, as a result, are well aware that a college degree does not guarantee long-term employment. This awareness has influenced their shift in focus from selecting a major for finding a job to identifying an academic path that supports their vocation—their purpose. Not only will administrators need to continue to keep access and affordability as top priorities when recruiting these students, they will need to design marketing strategies that demonstrate how their institution
will help them discover their purpose and construct a plan to live it out post-graduation. Furthermore, the study revealed, “a quarter of Generation Z students indicate that they do not like e-mail, and almost half indicate that they only somewhat like it” (p. 60). Clearly, this illuminates a need to strategize around how to communicate important information effectively to these students upon enrollment and throughout their educational journeys.

Student affairs practitioners will find useful information in each of the chapters of this book. They will learn the correlation between this generation’s views on human rights and social justice and the fact that they are the most socially diverse group in recent history and that they are graduating from high school with more diverse friend groups than previous generations. This could change our notion of how to deliver diversity education on our campuses. Practitioners will see the themes of relationships and mentors woven throughout several chapters, especially as related to students’ parents. The relationships between Gen Zers and their parents are different from those of Millennials. They see their parents as “sources of emotional and financial support” (p. 89). According to Seemiller (personal communication, 2017), the parents of Gen Z students are moving beyond being helicopter parents to becoming co-pilots. Gen Z students “take the opinions and perspectives of their family into consideration in their decision making” (p. 89). An awareness of this instinctual habit will help professionals be better prepared for students to turn to their trusted advisors when making important decisions during orientation and throughout their college years. Professionals can also infuse this knowledge into planning and assessment for both student-centered and parent- or family-focused programs. Furthermore, the chapter on leadership styles and capacities can help professionals think more intentionally about our systems and processes as we prepare for the recruitment of this generation of students for various leadership positions and campus employment opportunities.

For all readers, the overview of who these students are, in addition to the chapters on beliefs and perspectives, communication platforms, preferences, cares, and concerns are extremely pertinent and insightful. The authors warn that if higher education wants to stay relevant for this generation of students, faculty members must learn to tweak courses, redesign learning environments, and reevaluate their approaches to measuring and assessing learning; administrators must adapt processes; and student affairs practitioners must reimagine programming and engagement initiatives.

One recommendation for making the book stronger would be to add examples of practical action steps that correlate with each chapter topic. The authors clearly communicate the implications for adjustments and change on the part of higher education faculty, staff, and administrators; however, if they were to offer a few specific action steps for consideration, these would assist audiences, either individually or in work groups, with brainstorming ways that their valuable information can be applied on their campuses. If the authors took this tool one step further and provided practical examples of approaches to creating motivational scaffolding, for instance, audiences could consider those examples during strategic planning, faculty development workshops, and student
engagement planning discussions, while taking into consideration institutional differences.

Understanding generational differences has been just one tool in the toolbox for higher education professionals, whether they are faculty, staff, or administrators. Seemiller and Grace (2016) have packaged the pertinent information regarding the newest generation of students on our college campuses, Generation Z, into a quick, insightful, and entertaining reading experience. I agree with the authors’ sentiment that knowing and understanding the mindset and goals of this generation of college students is paramount to our ability to adjust curricular and co-curricular experiences and to support these students throughout their educational journeys. Are we ready to welcome the next generation of college students onto our campuses? Generation Z is here, so “let’s make a difference for them” (C. Seemiller, personal communication, 2017)!

References

Notes