Teaching and Advising First-Year Students

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"What do they think this is, high school????" If you have taught first-year college students, you may have felt such exasperation. Especially in the fall semester, first-year college students are truly like strangers in a strange land (Chaskes, 1996). Everything about the college setting is unfamiliar, from your campus acronyms to study skills that can facilitate success. Just as we citizens would not expect immigrants new to our country to master our colloquialisms and customs as soon as they set foot on land, we educators cannot reasonably expect new first-year college students to act like, well, natives, until they have had ample opportunity for enculturation (Chaskes, 1996). The goal of this article is to describe the attributes of first-year college students and make suggestions for what we as instructors and academic advisors can do to support their enculturation process into success on our campuses.

As the director of Academic Transition Programs on my campus, which includes our first-year seminar program and programming for undeclared students, I have become acquainted with the issues and best practices surrounding the First Year Experience (FYE), as it is known in higher education. As a psychology professor, I have found that information from the FYE facet of higher education can instruct what we do in our work as teachers and advisors of first- year college students. We can best support our students when we understand the broader context of their experience.

The Stakes are High: Student Retention and Flourishing

The first year of college is a high-stakes time: nationally, 29 percent of students do not return for the second year of college at four-year institutions. At two-year colleges, 46 percent do not return after the first year (ACT, 2009). Failure to retain students not only hurts our institutions financially; it also reveals a failure to carry out our mission of student success. In my view, every student who comes to a campus does so with particular goals; leaving so quickly reveals a failure to achieve those goals. Our institutions have an obligation to support student success to the best of our ability, and not simply to wish we had admitted better students in the first place (Kuh, 2005). Introductory courses often act as weed-out courses, whether intentionally or not. Nationally, introductory courses across the curriculum post failure rates ranging from 15 percent at research universities to 40-50 percent at community colleges (Twigg, 2005). Although data about failure rates for Introduction to Psychology are difficult to obtain, a 2008 review of such rates at 18 colleges in Pennsylvania revealed failure or withdrawal rates of 5 percent-32 percent, with a median of 12 percent (Chute, 2008).

However, certainly we want to do more than "retain" our students. We want them to flourish, to achieve all of their goals — and more. Who is responsible for student success? As institutions and as individual instructors and advisors, we all endorse student responsibility. But what does "student responsibility" mean, and what expectations are reasonable? Do we wish to create a "sink or swim" environment in which students who can't "hack it" fall out of the system, or do we wish to create a supportive environment that can scaffold students' development as they acclimate to our campus and college-level work (cf. Barr & Tagg, 1995)? How can we apply these principles to our work as psychology professors

to support the success of our students?

Attributes of First-Year College Students

Knowing the attributes of today's first-year students can help instructors and advisors to meet students where they are and target advice and support into areas specific to this cohort (Keup & Kinzie, 2007). Here I will provide a snapshot of the national scene, but more targeted information is likely available about your own campus; find out which offices on your campus deal the most with first-year students and get some insight from those professionals. First-year college students today show more diversity in terms of age and ethnicity than in previous generations. They are also more likely to report financial gain as a primary reason to obtain a college education (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). They are more likely to be the first in their family to go to college and more likely to have English as a second language (Keup & Kinzie, 2007). First-year students beginning college in Fall 2010 showed growing challenges to their potential for academic success: they reported lower levels of mental health, higher levels of invisible disabilities (such as ADHD and specific learning disabilities), and greater economic concerns than those in previous cohorts (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2010). However, the same report (Pryor et al., 2010) also contained some good news: this cohort of students was more likely to report they expect to be involved in co-curricular or service activities, to study abroad, and to be satisfied overall with their college experience. First-year students today also reflect the attributes of the wired Millennial Generation; the reader is referred to a recent Teaching Tips column on this subject (Nevid, 2011).

Supporting First-Year Students in the Classroom

You are probably one of the very few grown-ups on campus with whom your first-year students speak on a regular basis. What can you do in the classroom to support their transition to college?

- **Make your expectations clear.** There is a mismatch between what *you* think your students need to do to be successful and what *they* think they need to do — and what they then *actually* do. In fact, students study less in their first year than they thought they would — and much less than you think they should (Kuh, 2005). Over the past 30 years, new first-year students report spending less time studying in high school and yet earn higher grades in their high school courses. This can lead to a sense of entitlement for good grades while not having to work particularly hard to get them. The disappointment and confusion that ultimately result once students meet the realities of college can be addressed through advising (Keup & Kinzie, 2007).
- **Be approachable.** To first-year students, friends on campus or family at home are more likely to be consulted for assistance than faculty and staff on campus. More first-year students report feeling intimidated by their instructors than feel that they get to know them, and even fewer report meaningful interactions with advisors (Keup & Kinzie, 2007).
- **Provide feedback early and often.** Many first-year students have no idea that their skills and habits will lead to academic failure until it is too late to save their first semester courses and GPA. By providing quizzes and assignments very early in the semester, you give your students the opportunity to realize the new demands in time for them to meet the challenge. In my Introduction to Psychology course, I give a quiz on the first chapter that typically yields a mean in the D range. Because it is worth only 5 percent of the final grade, this is a low-stakes way to provide strong feedback that helps students recognize the need for a new approach to their

academic habits.

- **Scaffold their development.** If you are teaching a course filled with first-year students, build your course to reflect the fact that they will be much more enculturated and self-sufficient at the end of the semester than at the beginning. In September students need more frequent reminders of upcoming assignments and more detailed assignment handouts to ensure they are fully aware of their responsibilities. As the semester progresses, students will build skills in organization, time management, and study strategies, so that by November or December, less prompting will be required from you. This scaffolded approach meets students where they are in their academic development and helps to lead them to where they need to be for continuing success on your campus in the next semester.
- **Address magical thinking.** Some of my first-year students report that in high school, they could neglect to study or do the homework, and somehow they passed with acceptable grades. Students may think the same outcome will occur in college. I have spoken with many first-year college students who think that a given professor won't really "fail me;" that extra credit worksheets will be available at the end of the semester; and that somehow one's grades will improve on subsequent assessments even though one's behaviors have not changed. Banish these beliefs from your students' minds by addressing them explicitly. Show them how final grades are calculated and assure them there is no magic coming during "finals" week. Share data with them about the links between study time, attendance, and success (Keup & Kinzie, 2007).
- **Give them the Big Picture.** Whether your students tend to be psychology majors or come from various majors at your institution, be aware that it is more common for students to change the major with which they entered college than to graduate with it (cf. Cuseo, 1995). Help them to explore not only the psych major and career fields but point out linkages to others, as well. Are Criminal Justice and Education popular majors on your campus? Tie in the course material to those fields to show the links to what they are learning in your course.
- **Brief comments go a long way.** Anyone who teaches first-year students can be an ambassador for your campus's resources and for higher education culture. In addition to addressing your regular course content, invest brief moments to address college-transition issues. Reminders to see their advisor when a deadline is approaching for registration or withdrawing from a course, the location of the tutoring center and how to make an appointment, the value of joining a student organization, and when the Psychology Club's first meeting is are just a sample of pithy insights you can share in a matter of seconds, but ones that can have a lasting impact on your students' experience in their first year. Implementation can vary from dedicating class time to these issues, to just making small talk before class starts, to sending "Did you know?" emails.

Don't Go it Alone

Part of helping your students adjust to college is to help them get to know the campus and its resources. What does your department do for new majors before, during, and after formal university orientation programs? Can it do more to introduce faculty to students, students to each other, and students to a positive campus learning community and culture? Know the processes and contact people on your campus for at-risk students. Is there an early warning system? Students may not know they are "really" going to fail until it is too late to withdraw from the course or make enough change in their academic habits to matter. Familiarize yourself and your students with resources on campus that support student success, including offices, services, and online tools.

Advising First-Year Students

Advising first-year students takes a different set of skills and expectations than does advising more advanced students. A five-stage Novice-to-Expert model of academic advising was outlined by Darling and Woodside (2007), following Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986). Students begin in the Novice stage with a "Just tell me what to do" mentality because that is all they are capable of. They cannot make choices about courses, etc., because they do not have any understanding of the options or their consequences, so they follow rules to the letter and cannot yet embrace their independence. The role of the advisor is to provide structure and information about immediate decisions and to begin the process of introducing the student to university policies, practices, and opportunities. In each later stage, the student continually becomes more enculturated and autonomous, and the role of the advisor can change. At each stage, the advisor responds to the students' characteristics and developmental stage, providing information, support, or encouragement as needed. Furthermore, the advisor can share with the students the insight that they are at the very first stage of a continually-progressing process, and that they will in fact feel comfortable and capable of navigating — indeed, mastering — the college culture and campus. The advisor role evolves to one of support and encouragement and a sounding board for ideas.

Content of the Introductory Psychology Course

Another avenue for supporting our first-year students' transition to college is through our course material itself. As instructors of psychology, we are very lucky: it is easy and natural for us to relate our course material to students' lives and adjustment to college (unlike, say, our colleagues in physics). The unit on memory can be applied to their study strategies and best learning techniques. The unit on development can address life transitions, particularly during late adolescence and early adulthood, as well as their continuing neural development. The unit on psychological disorders can include information about those most common among college students and how to tap into resources on your campus for help. On my campus, I recently heard two misconceptions from first-year students about our Counseling and Psychological Services Center. One student feared the visits being recorded on her academic transcript and being seen by future employers. Another student worried that the psychological counselors would be the same people she went to for academic advising. A few words from you about how your campus counseling center operates can make a big difference to unfamiliar and scared students. Overall, the content of the Introduction to Psychology course can be readily applied to supporting the transition to college.

Concluding Remarks

". . .all students have a first year experience whether or not we intentionally design it for them." (Hunter, Henscheid, & Mouton, 2007, p. 99).

First-year students' transition to college is a high-stakes process, for the individual student as well as for our institutions. As course instructors and advisors, we are well-positioned to support this transition through our attention to the individual student experience, recognition of the students' unfamiliarity with our campus and campus culture, application of course content in relevant ways, and developmental advising. Indeed, as one of the few faculty or staff on your campus with whom your students speak on a regular basis, you are uniquely positioned to do so. Work collaboratively with other offices on campus and take advantage of any opportunities for faculty development about these issues. Before you know it,

your first-year students will be fully enculturated members of your campus community, ready to take full opportunity to successfully pursue their goals.