

UD's 2014 Spotlight on Technology, Art, Research & Scholarship (STARS)

Proposed Presentation Abstract

Insights from the College Sophomore Year Experience:

The Power of Student Voice

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The first year experience has garnered a great deal of attention within American higher education and now across the world (Hunter, 2006). In many ways, this focus makes good sense. Going to college, for traditional and non-traditional age students, is a major life change. Students often need significant resources to successfully negotiate the transition into college, becoming comfortable with the demands of independent study and life. The result of the shifts of services and resources to the first year has been quite positive: including increased retention, satisfaction, and engagement. However, the result of focus on one component of the college experience can lead to an unbalanced focus on that population.

The focus of this presentation will my research with college sophomores conducted over more than 15 years and my work with more than 100 colleges and universities as they examine the sophomore year experience. My research on the sophomore year experience suggests that the sophomore year is a particularly challenging time for college students. This challenge is often described as a "neutral zone" where students find that they have left the notions of their pre-college years behind (in some cases, their childhood), but have yet to determine or decide what they want for their lives and their futures. This neutral zone (first coined by Bridges, 1980) can become a period of "focused exploration" (Schaller, 2005). If college life is designed well, the insights that students have gathered during the first year of college can provide a great deal of understanding for our students. The insight comes from increased self-reflection and heightened sense of responsibility for one's life. At the same time, institutions may be removing supports or intentional programs. Sophomores may be experiencing increasingly challenging classes, larger class size, and decreased contact with faculty and academic advisors. In essence, this period of insight for students is met with a complete lack of attention on the college sophomore. Once students declare their major, become enrolled in upper level courses, and build closer relationships with faculty as mentors, their experience within the institution becomes, once again, intentional. In designing an intentional four year experience, colleges and universities would do well to explore issues related to student needs, including transition issues and developmental needs.