

1-1-2010

Growing Pains: Transitional Issues in Higher Education

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Recommended Citation

Fletcher, Louis (2010) "Growing Pains: Transitional Issues in Higher Education," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4, Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss4/28>

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Academic Leadership Journal

High school provides a structured environment which moves young adults through a daily routine of educational and social activities. Teachers and administrators are openly concerned about the student's feelings and attitudes toward the overall educational experience. Parents are usually close at hand to encourage and empower their students through the tough times. They also provide financial support and transportation, at a minimum, when things are routine. Secondary education is intended to be a warm cocoon which nurtures the student-caterpillar into a well adjusted young butterfly within a parent-teacher chrysalis. Higher education has not traditionally provided the aforementioned structure; therefore, the attrition rate for freshmen is often high. Student transition and retention is an important student service issue in higher education "because the way in which an individual copes with stress relates to mental and physical well-being (Bonica & Daniel, 2003), the ability to successfully cope in the new college environment is crucial for success" (Pritchard & Wilson, 2006, p.125).

University recruiters solicit the best and the brightest high school students with high powered marketing campaigns. Scholarships and other incentives are often used to close the deal. However most diverse students experience culture shock when they arrive in their new environment, due to the free flowing nature of the college campus, and support has not traditionally been at a premium. Scheduling their classes; which could begin at anytime of the day or night, without a support system to prompt to attendance or study sessions could be quite overwhelming. Acclimating students to their new environment requires that "appropriate support systems must be activated during the very first interaction students and their families have with the university" (Budny & Paul, 2003, p. 2).

"Tinto's (1993) assertion that students need to 'break away' from past associations and traditions to become integrated into the college's social and academic realms" (Guiffrida, 2006, p. 451) is widely accepted but may fail to address the needs of diverse students. Assimilation is not a palatable strategy to incorporate diverse students who traditionally rely on close family ties and a familiar social system. The alternative is to build bridges using transitional programs that embrace diversity and further incorporate it as a part of student life. Mike Middleton, the deputy chancellor for the University of Missouri at Columbia, a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), values his school's summer program and stated "the transitions program is specially designed to increase diversity on campus" (Anonymous, 2003, p. 16). Conversely, Princeton University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology planned to abandon such programs pending court rulings based on allegations of reverse discrimination; "Legal groups opposed to affirmative action had sent those universities letters accusing them of discrimination against white students" (Anonymous, 2003, p. 16). According to Veenstra 2009; "The value of the student to the university is also important in non-monetary terms. The student may add diversity of ideas or more engagement in his/her classrooms," (Veenstra, 2009, p. 21) which is the goal of Mike Middleton and other similarly minded university officials. Clearly diversity as a transitional factor solicits varying degrees acceptance and controversy in higher education institutions.

Transitional programs should create an environment that does not stigmatize any segment of the freshman target population. For example, "acceptance and welcoming should be modeled and illustrated, but should not be labeled 'diversity training' or 'diversity appreciation' (Boening & Miller,

2005, p.48) because being singled out could both be threatening and breed animosity between minority and majority groups. This could furthermore give the false impression that diverse groups did not earn their place in higher education and are attending school as part of a social experiment. Unquestionably transitioning diverse students has a long history which has informed legal and cultural agendas.

Students with physical disabilities are another group of students in higher education which has specialized transition concerns. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has mandated physical changes which make it less difficult for the differently able to participate in higher education. The changes to physical infrastructure are ahead of the policies necessary to facilitate stronger transition programs for these students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that secondary school teams use an Individual Education Program (IEP) to facilitate educational goals for students that are differently able. Because IDEA does not apply to higher education, transition programs for the differently able at the post secondary level are often at the hazard of the institutional politics. However, “the university should be careful not to establish difficult procedures that might hinder students with disabilities from receiving special education accommodations” (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005, p. 10) or they could face the type of litigation which could fundamentally change their modus operandi.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA constitute the strongest anti-discrimination laws available to provide access to the differently able; however, the focus of these reforms is also primarily physical access. Although the physically disabled have made strides the learning disabled (LD) are left behind as the least understood students facing transitional barriers. The Section 504, Subpart D plans, which LD students depend upon on during secondary education, end with the last day of high school “Although colleges may use these plans in admissions decisions, they are not obligated to follow the requirements of these plans” (Madaus, 2005, p. 33). Furthermore, accommodations made at the secondary level could become a barrier to degree completion since higher education is not constrained by the same rules. For example; the absence of math or foreign language on the high school transcript may require an explanation of the learning disability in the college application to mitigate the admissions office’s perception, but this will not change the university’s general education core requirements. Furthermore when multiple diversity factors exist;

“Schools continue to struggle to meet the needs of youth with disabilities who are also youth of color, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and/or from immigrant families who are dominant in languages other than English, prior to and during postsecondary transition” (Trainor, 2008, p. 149).

Despite their best efforts to get into college, learning disabled student may not survive their freshman year based on the differences in support; dictated by law, during this critical transition.

Student transition and retention is an important student service issue in higher education and there are multiple factors that can impact success. Students that are the most highly recruited can still succumb to the lack of structure and distance from a parental support system at traditional universities. The pressure is compounded for minorities if the university’s philosophy aims to assimilate the diverse students. Conversely, overzealous diversity efforts that single minority students out can cause equal discomfort and cause animosity within the student body. Differently able students have made strides in special education legislation at the secondary level, but this does not extend much beyond physical access at the higher education level. Learning disabled students face unique challenges because of

the mismatch in services, which can stifle the transition, from secondary to higher education. When disabilities occur in combination with other diversity factors, the institutional support system becomes even less capable. Without a doubt more synchronization needs to occur to facilitate a better transition process for all students to higher education, however there should be a special emphasis on diversity and disability.

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VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]