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Implementing a Ninth Grade Academy: A Dissertation in Practice

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IMPLEMENTING A NINTH GRADE ACADEMY

A Dissertation in Practice

Executive Summary

Submitted to the
Faculty of Lynn University,
College of Education



In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

By
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April 23, 2017



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Executive Summary

I. Summary of Problem in Practice

Students transition three to four times in the course of their traditional education journey; beginning with entry into elementary school, from elementary to middle school, then from middle to high school, and finally from high school to college. These transition years prove to be tough on students' achievement levels and emotional stability (Lee & Friedrich, 2007) and the transition from middle school to high school is often the most difficult transition in K-12 education (Ellerbrock, Denmon & Owens, 2015). In the ninth grade, students fail three to five times more than in any other grade level in high school (Black, 2004). Isakson and Jarvis (1999), found that during the transition to high school, stressors in students' lives are at their highest during the middle of the freshman year, with an inverse correlation to the number of stressors and students' Grade Point Average. As a result, by the time students adjust to high school, many have already buried themselves with low grades, poor attendance and weak affiliations.

However, high schools can address these stressors and mitigate their negative impact on performance through intentional programmatic changes geared toward facilitating the transition of students. The researchers of this Dissertation in Practice have experience in successfully implementing a Ninth Grade Academy at two different schools: Atlantic Community High School in Delray Beach, Florida and Santaluces Community High School in Lantana, Florida. Results and data from these Ninth Grade Academies showed that, with proper leadership, tools, guidance, and support, graduation rates increased after implementation.

Although there are many resources offering information about the transition to ninth grade, there is a gap in resources that provide guidance to schools about how to successfully implement the elements of effective transitional programs. As a result, this study has sought to develop and evaluate a website that provides high school leaders with resources, information and guidance that will allow them to develop or refine a ninth grade transition program. The website was designed to include literary resources, guiding questions, school exemplars, and step-by-step processes to help the school leader implement the key elements of an effective ninth grade transition model. The website was then evaluated through the collection of survey data and feedback related to the value of the content and functionality of the website.

II. Summary of Major Research Findings in the Literature

In designing the essential elements of a Ninth Grade Academy, there were several major practices that stood out in the research on effective strategies for high school transition. These elements, correlated to improved student success and teacher performance, were combined together to develop the Ninth Grade Academy model described in the website developed for this study: www.ninthgradeacademy.com.

Several effective practices are centered around the work of Felner and others on Small Learning Communities, which is manifested in the Ninth Grade Academy model as the cohorting of students and teacher teams. A small learning community, or SLC, is defined as “the organizational structuring of high schools that seeks to create smaller, more personalized, autonomous learning environments for improving educational outcomes within their larger,

extant structures” (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). The SLC model is common in middle school settings, but not as evident in high schools.

As school leaders were looking for programs to close the achievement gap of underperforming schools, especially in large urban districts, SLCs became a very popular approach in the early 2000’s (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). The SLC framework seeks to create smaller learning environments for students by teaming students as well as teachers into smaller groupings. SLCs can take on many formats, but the most popular are career academies, schools-within-schools, magnets, houses, and freshman academies (Lee & Friedrich, 2007). Each of these formats has a targeted theme or approach to organizing students into smaller communities. By breaking students into smaller learning communities, it creates a more personalized context which “...alters the regularities of the complex social setting of the school in ways that unlock student energy and motivation and that give students a sense of growth, of personal agency, of competence, of being someone whose individuality is recognized and fertilized” (Felner et al., 2007).

Barker and Gump (1964) initiated this concept through their research on the term they coined ‘campus model,’ where students had repeated contacts between the same teachers and students (as cited in Lee et al., 2002). Barker and Gump professed that this would help encourage social bonds, providing the advantages of a large school with the social values of a small school (Lee et al., 2002). “Empirical research on small schools overwhelmingly affirms their effectiveness vis-à-vis large schools in terms of educational attainments such as student achievement, academic equity, graduation rates and safety” (Lee and Friedrich, 2007; Cotton,

2001; Howley, 1994; Howley et al., 2000; Klonsky and Klonsky, 1999; Lee and Smith, 1995; Pittman and Haughwout, 1987; Stiefel et al., 2000).

In addition to student cohorting and teacher teaming, proximity grouping or “housing” is also an essential element of the small learning community in the Ninth Grade Academy model. The purpose of proximity grouping is to contain students from grade levels together in their small learning communities. This allows for a separate ninth grade hall or building, providing students with a safe place or “landing zone.” Students are not engulfed by the general school population, but are sheltered with other ninth grade students and teachers most of the day, which can help calm fears and anxiety. It can also help with tardiness and attendance, since students don’t have to travel across the school campus to get to class. For teachers, proximity grouping also allows for frequent contact and cooperative collegiality, utilizing team members to help with creative classroom management and pedagogical strategies.

Another effective practice incorporated in the Ninth Grade Academy model is based on the importance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as defined through the work of DuFour and others. Professional Learning Communities may be defined as a group of “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). The use of professional learning communities establishes “a school-wide-culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes” (Toole & Louis, 2002).

Teachers in PLCs look at course content and standards to identify a realistic set of universal skills and concepts in which students should achieve proficiency. They then

collaborate to develop ways of understanding whether their students have achieved the identified knowledge and skills. An effective PLC explores ways to accelerate and help students who have not grasped the concepts right away, while simultaneously identifying ways to enhance learning for those students who are ready to deepen their understanding, thus attending to the learning needs of *all* students (DuFour et al, 2008). According to DuFour, these are the driving factors behind a PLC; studies examined in our literature review show that these characteristics of PLCs are universal, and so they were incorporated into the Ninth Grade Academy model.

While PLCs work collaboratively using data to create meaningful classroom activities that support student learning measured by the data, the goal of data collection is not only to improve student learning, but to help teachers improve their teaching practice (DuFour, 2004). School leadership plays a large role in the effectiveness of using data in improving teaching practice. Teachers should receive frequent and consistent feedback on their teaching that focuses on both their strengths and weaknesses. They must be given ample time to collaborate, to look at student data, and to discuss the needs of students so that they can ensure students leave school career and college ready. School leadership must not only provide actionable feedback to teachers, but also help them to develop goals, offer support, and provide an environment where teachers can routinely develop their skills (Murphy et al, 2013).

An additional aspect that is important to the structure of the Ninth Grade Academy model is the development of all students toward college readiness. One of the earliest and best-known efforts to define college readiness was the seminal study undertaken by Dr. David T. Conley in 2003, in which Conley recruited more than 400 faculty members from twenty research

universities and asked them to identify the knowledge and skills that students need to have in order to succeed in entry-level courses at their universities (Conley, 2003).

Conley defines college readiness as possessing the content knowledge, strategies, skills, and techniques necessary to be successful in any of a range of post-secondary settings. Notice that this definition includes more than just academic knowledge – it includes strategies and skills that can be taught alongside content knowledge, so that students know how to take ownership of their learning and can handle rigorous coursework by using academic strategies, behaviors and tools. These are critical thinking and behavioral skills that *all* students need, whether they plan to attend college or not.

There are two important reasons to include a focus on college readiness for all high school students, and for freshmen in particular. The first reason is that a post-secondary credential (whether a two- or four-year degree or an industry certification) is in greater demand than ever before. Some form of post-secondary education or training has essentially become the “threshold requirement” for access to middle-class status and earnings (Carnavale & Smith, 2010). Postsecondary attainment is even more significant for the lowest income Americans who are five times more likely than their peers to escape poverty if they complete a college degree (National College Access Network, 2015). With post-secondary success so closely tied to future income and employability, it is critical that *all* students graduate from high school “college ready.”

The second reason is that, if students are not on track for college readiness by the end of the ninth grade, their chances of post-secondary success are dramatically diminished. The Strategic Data Project (2015) found that post-secondary outcomes were related to students’

college readiness status in ninth grade. They found that 74% of students who were college ready at the end of the freshman year went on to enroll seamlessly in post-secondary study, while those identified as ‘critical’ only had an 11% likelihood of enrolling in college. Even students who were graduation ready, but not college ready, at the end of ninth grade had only a 58% chance of enrolling seamlessly into college compared to those who were identified as college ready.

The development of college readiness skills was built into the Ninth Grade Academy model through the concept of school culture. A college going culture is created when schools offer and encourage students to follow an appropriately rigorous academic track that gives access to opportunities for earning college credit through accelerated courses, and through the development of both cognitive and conative skills. These skills can be promoted through the implementation of a ninth grade support class, through a summer bridge program, through the setting of high expectations, and through strategies modeled and used schoolwide by teachers in all classes. This focus on college readiness skills will provide an additional purpose for learning and a solid foundation of skills for student success throughout high school, mitigating the impact of low performance commonly experienced by freshmen.

Having a dedicated school counselor is a pivotal strategy in the Ninth Grade Academy model. The transition to high school includes myriad changes for students, many of which are beyond the scope of academics alone, with the potential for both immediate and possible long term implications. It is often a time marred with loneliness, isolation, and disconnection (Cooper & Liou, 2007). Research conducted by Akos and Galassi (2004), suggests that 40% of students suffer problems after the transition to high school. The inclusion of a dedicated counselor for ninth grade students becomes crucial in this regard. The counselor in a Ninth Grade Academy

should be versed in the hardships associated with ninth graders and should be tasked with only the freshman class. The main goal of a ninth grade counselor is to establish feelings of inclusion and support, creating a school climate where acceptance and success are possible and encouraged. Entering ninth grade is a new stage in life course, even more so than a transition to college (Neild, 2009).

The ninth grade counselor serves as an “early detection system” for students who are struggling with the transition to high school. To foster success, ninth graders must feel comfortable in their new surroundings, have the tools to accomplish challenging material, and navigate the adolescent social scene (Neild, 2009).

There are four main theories for why ninth graders struggle with the transition to high school: life course changes, transition to a new school, inadequate preparation, and high school organization and climate. During adolescence, studies show that parents allow their children more autonomy (Neild, 2009). Thus, there is less parental support, supervision and encouragement during this time.

The transition to high school impacts relationships. Changing schools requires the breaking of previously established bonds with teachers and students, and creating new ones. The uncertainty of social connections can be daunting and can have detrimental effects on the positive acclimation to a new school setting.

Students may come into high school unprepared for the rigor. Prior to high school, students may not have been challenged academically. They may not have the required skills or the knowledge base necessary to be successful. Feeling overwhelmed without the semblance of hope may completely discourage students, preventing them from ever succeeding.

High schools are tasked with ensuring that *all* students are successful. The difficulty of this task, is that students have distinctly different needs. Ninth graders have a crucial need for structural support. Having a dedicated school counselor that is versed in the specific needs associated with ninth graders would alleviate many of the issues associated with the four main theories as to why students struggle with the transition to high school.

III. Context and Methodology of the Study

The research questions that inspired this study were:

- What are school leaders' deliberate practices that promote smooth transitions for students in ninth grade?
- How useful is the Ninth Grade Academy website in giving school leaders the tools and resources to feel comfortable in implementing a ninth grade transition program?

As previously noted, the essential structures of the Ninth Grade Academy model were founded on research-based strategies identified in the review of literature on school transition. The goal of creating a website was to fill the void of available resources that provide guidance to school leaders about how to successfully implement a high school transition program using the deliberate practices of effective programs. The decision to create a Ninth Grade Academy website was inspired by the speed and efficiency with which a website can provide information and the ubiquitous nature of the Internet as a source of information. A website is also a powerful tool for curating information in a central location, making it a “one stop shop” for resources and guidance related to high school transition.

The website was designed to be an informative, “how to” guide to inspire implementation of a ninth grade academy. Its design was meant to engage the educational professional. It is specifically designed for school administrators as the target audience, with their focus and perspective in mind. Because time is at a premium for school leaders, it was essential to create a website that catered to this need. The ease of website navigation, the need for concise but essential information, and the inclusion of tools and resources that support the key elements of effective implementation were at the heart of the decision making process in the design of the website.

The website’s home page provides the rationale and research behind the 9g Ninth Grade Academy model. The site utilizes a main tool bar that is limited to three key options beyond the home page: an explanation of the five essential components, an outline of the Ninth Grade Academy model and an *About Us* page. This simplistic layout streamlines the search process. The *5 Essential Components* tab includes the five non-negotiable items that the model relies on. These components are: *Student Cohorts, Teacher Teams, Common Planning, Proximity Grouping* and *Academy Leadership*.

The step-by-step explanation of the Ninth Grade Academy model is laid out in the *9g Model* pages by outlining the different elements needed at each stage of Planning, Implementation, and Sustainability and Extension. This was done to simultaneously appeal to administrators who were new to the concept of establishing a ninth grade transition program as well as those who might be currently implementing a program, but need support to expand or sustain their work. The *About Us* page was provided to establish the expertise of the researchers

as credible developers of the website, and to provide a link to the survey for participants providing feedback on the website.

Participants

The participants of this study were originally intended to be administrators, whether district administrators, high school principals, assistant principals, or teacher leaders. For the purposes of the study, a teacher leader was defined as a department head, teacher coach, guidance counselor or other program coordinator. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the volunteers were solicited through the researchers' professional networks. Because the researchers' professional networks were used to identify participants, teacher participants were included and were grouped together with teacher leaders in the data analysis. Additionally, the original intent was to confine the participants to the southeastern region of the United States; however, because several of the researchers are involved in international education programs, their networks allowed for the participation of diverse educators from across the globe.

The anticipated sample size was approximately 50 completed surveys, although the original survey distribution was planned for a larger group of about 100 to accommodate an adequate return rate. At the conclusion of the study period, there were 76 respondents with varying degrees of background knowledge.

Methodology

This study was designed to evaluate the content and functionality of the Ninth Grade Academy website using a mixed-method approach. An online survey was chosen as the method of evaluation due to its convenience, brevity and anonymity. Question responses and website analytics generated both qualitative and quantitative feedback. Question responses varied

between binary answers (“yes” or “no”), Likert Scales, coded short answer responses, and number of hits to the website pages, making up the quantitative data. The qualitative data included the results of the open-ended short answer questions. The feedback was analyzed and assessed to improve the overall quality of the content and functionality of the website.

The survey contained 21 questions soliciting information and feedback in the following areas:

- Current role and background knowledge
- Website layout and format
- Rationale for a Ninth Grade Academy
- Essential components of a Ninth Grade Academy
- Information and support for each phase of implementation
- Value of the resources provided on the website.

Participants were required to answer each question prior to moving to the following question. Each section included the opportunity for an open-ended short answer response to allow for specific qualitative feedback. Google Forms was the platform used to create, distribute and collect survey responses. Google Forms was selected as it allows participants to respond anonymously and is accessible without a required login. Google Forms also provides easy access to results data for analysis and interpretation. The surveys were distributed via email and social media in January 2017 and the data was collected and analyzed in March 2017.

There are few, if any, ethical considerations involved in this study as participation was voluntary, results were collected and reported anonymously and data shared was aggregated such

that no individual participant can be recognized. There was no deception involved and there was no risk or negative impact for participants.

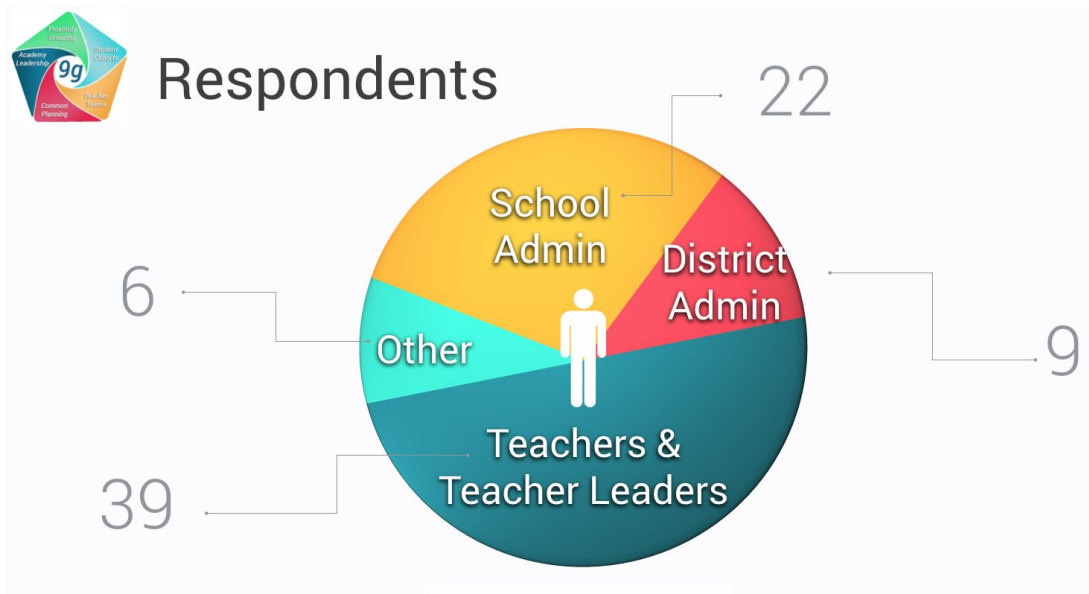
The quality of the data collected is trustworthy due to purposive sampling, as the characteristics of the participants were directly related to the research question. Additionally, participants were allowed to review their responses prior to submitting them to provide “member check,” thereby increasing validity. The sample size of 50 participants is acceptable as a qualitative sample base.

The quantitative feedback was used to indicate whether or not the website is a useful tool for school leaders in implementing practices to create an effective high school transition program. The quantitative findings were also used to validate the proposed components of an effective high school transition program. The qualitative responses were aggregated and assessed to identify appropriate changes to improve the content and the functionality of the website prior to public release. The qualitative survey responses were coded to facilitate analysis as follows: -1 represented either a negative opinion or some form of actionable feedback, such as a specific suggestion for change, 0 was assigned to neutral comments or comments irrelevant to the question, and 1 represented comments that were strictly complimentary and did not include actionable feedback. The specific actionable feedback was considered in order to identify adjustments and improvements for the website content.

IV. Summary of Results

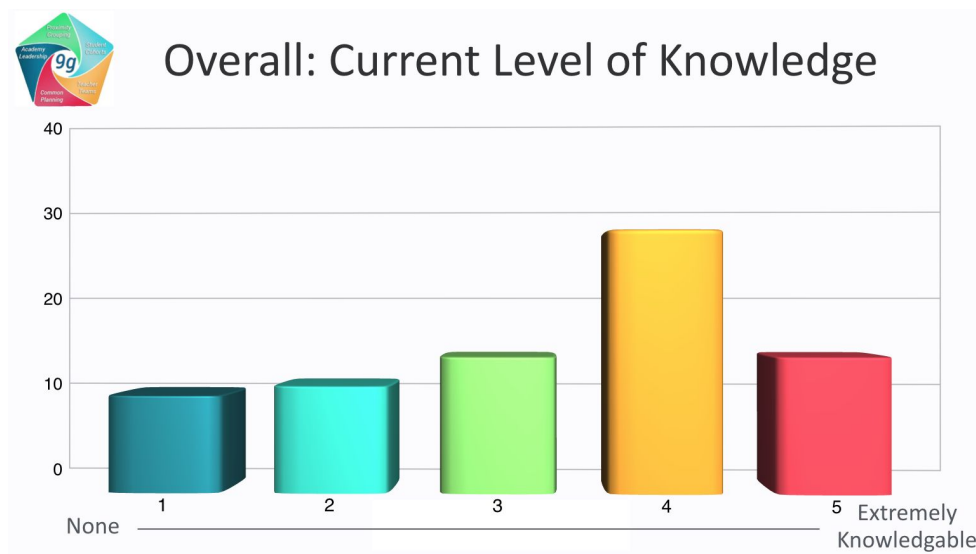
There were 76 total responses to the survey, which included 39 teachers/teacher leaders, 22 school site administrators and nine district administrators (which were combined as “administrators” for analysis purposes), and six “other” respondents (See Table 1 below).

Table 1: Respondents



The respondents were asked to indicate their current level of knowledge about ninth grade academies on a five-point Likert scale, with 5 being “extremely knowledgeable” and 1 being “no knowledge.” There was a range of background knowledge, however the majority of respondents (53.9%) felt they were very or extremely knowledgeable about ninth grade academies (self-rated as a 4 or 5) as outlined in Table 2 below. Only 27.7% rated their knowledge as limited or non-existent (as rated by 2 or 1) and 18.4% ranked their background knowledge as average (as rated by a 3).

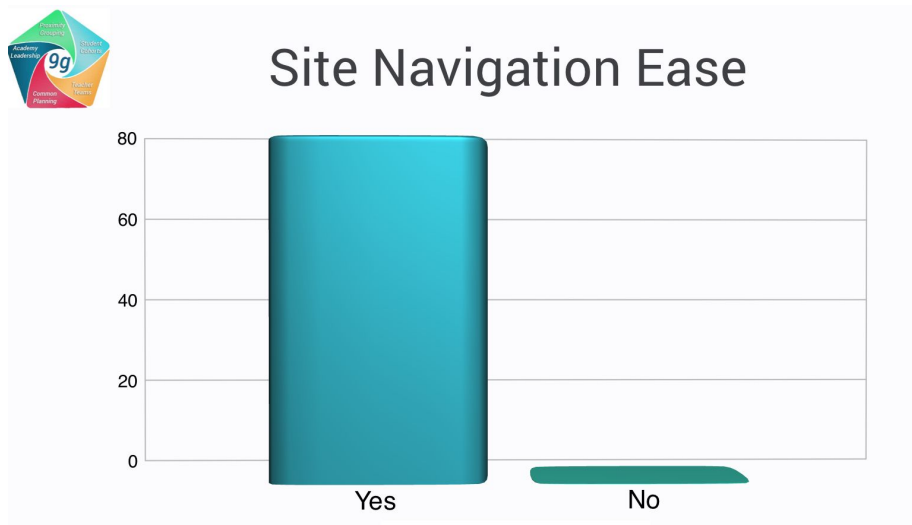
Table 2: Current Level of Knowledge



This result was not unexpected, because the survey was targeted mainly toward the research team’s peers and colleagues within their circle of influence. This approach was intentionally used because the purpose of the survey was to determine whether or not the website produced had adequately outlined the appropriate deliberate practices needed to establish a successful Ninth Grade Academy. The inclusion of some colleagues unfamiliar with a Ninth Grade Academy also enabled the researchers to identify whether or not the website had provided information in a method sufficient to justify and outline the process of establishing a Ninth Grade Academy for those who were new to the concept.

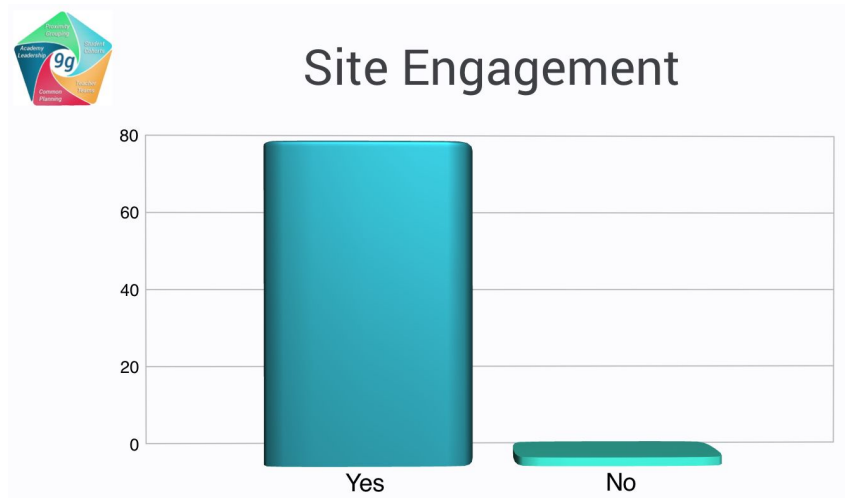
The survey also sought to identify whether the website was easy for potential users to navigate, and results confirm that it was (See Table 3). Nevertheless, there were 38 respondents who provided specific feedback regarding the navigation of the site: two comments were negative, five were neutral and 31 were positive.

Table 3: Ease of Navigation



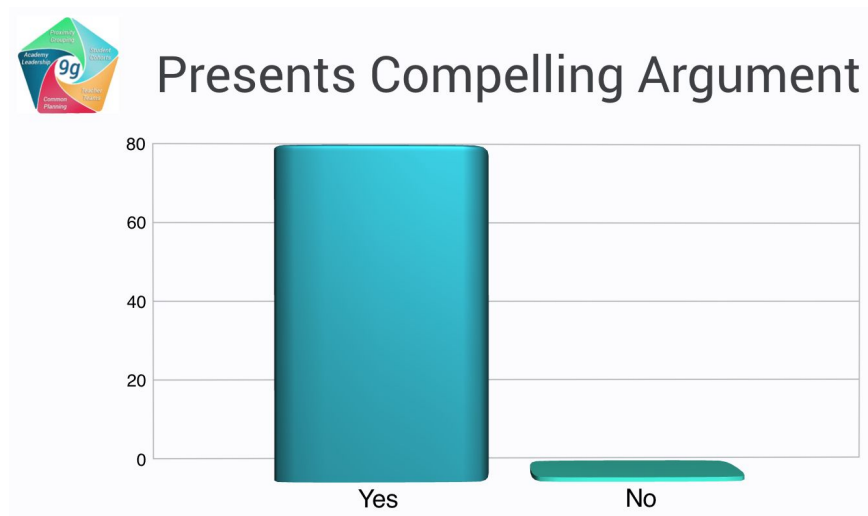
The majority of respondents also found the website to be engaging (97.4%) – only two respondents did not find it engaging (See Table 4 below). There was not an option in the survey to provide feedback on this aspect of the website; it would have been useful to include a request for specific feedback as a follow up question.

Table 4: Site Engagement



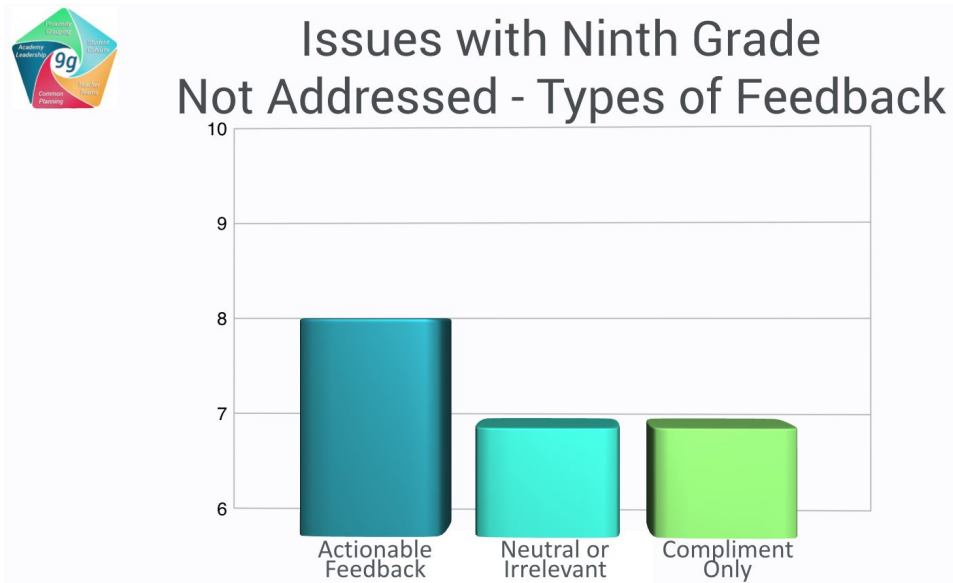
There were 14 questions specifically related to the individual aspects of the Ninth Grade Academy website content. With regard to the rationale for a ninth grade transition program, the majority of respondents (98.7%) felt that the need for a Ninth Grade Academy was compellingly explained; only one person felt that it was not (See Table 5 below).

Table 5: Rationale



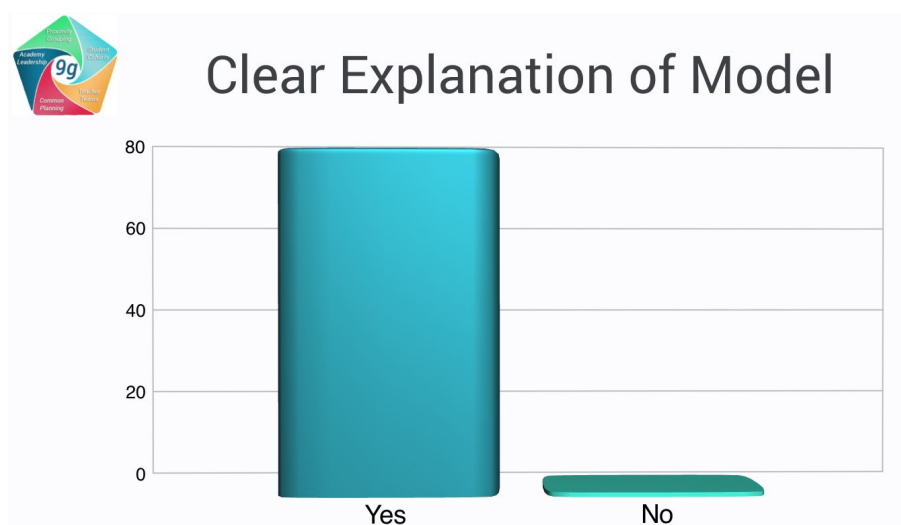
The survey asked respondents to identify any critical aspects or essential components that were not included in the website. Of the 27 responses provided, only seven of the comments indicated suggestions of missing or additional elements that might be included in the website. The results were categorized as Actionable Feedback, Neutral or Irrelevant Comment, or Complimentary remark (See Table 6 below). The actionable feedback included the following issues to be addressed: Response to Intervention, ELL students, ESE students, testimonials, non-college bound students, and discipline.

Table 6: Issues Not Addressed



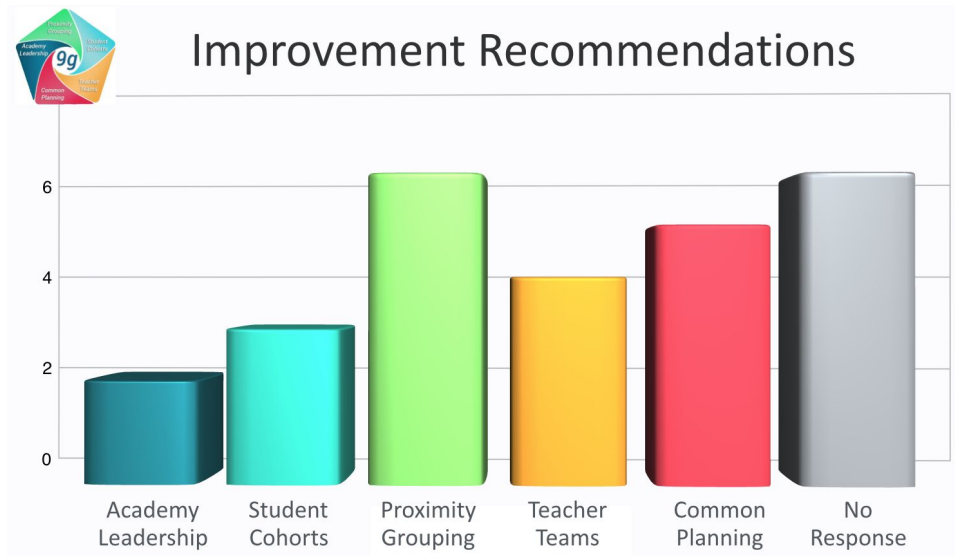
As indicated by Table 7 below, nearly all respondents (98.7%) felt the five essential components were clearly explained; only one person felt they were not.

Table 7: Clear Explanation of Model



It was telling that, in follow up questions requesting specific feedback about each of the essential components individually, 81.4% still indicated that all components were clearly explained. As outlined in Table 8 below, recommendations for components needing further clarification were: *Student Cohorts* (4.3%), *Teacher Teams* (5.7%), *Common Planning* (7.1%), *Academy Leadership* (2.9%), and *Proximity Grouping* (8.6%). There were seven actionable suggestions provided to improve these elements. Of these suggestions, the majority (3) applied to the *Teacher Teams* page, while only one suggestion was given for each of the other elements: *Student Cohorts*, *Common Planning*, *Academy Leadership*, and *Proximity Grouping*.

Table 8: Improvement Recommendations



Respondents were asked to rate each section of the *9g Model* pages on a Likert scale with 5 being “extremely helpful” and 1 being “not at all helpful.” The survey then included a follow up question asking respondents to indicate which pages within each section needed improvement. When asked to rate the Planning Phase section of the website 92.1% of

respondents rated this section as a 4 or 5. There were no respondents who rated the Planning Phase section as a 1, but 6.6% rated it as a 3 and only 1.3 % rated it as a 2 (See Table 9).

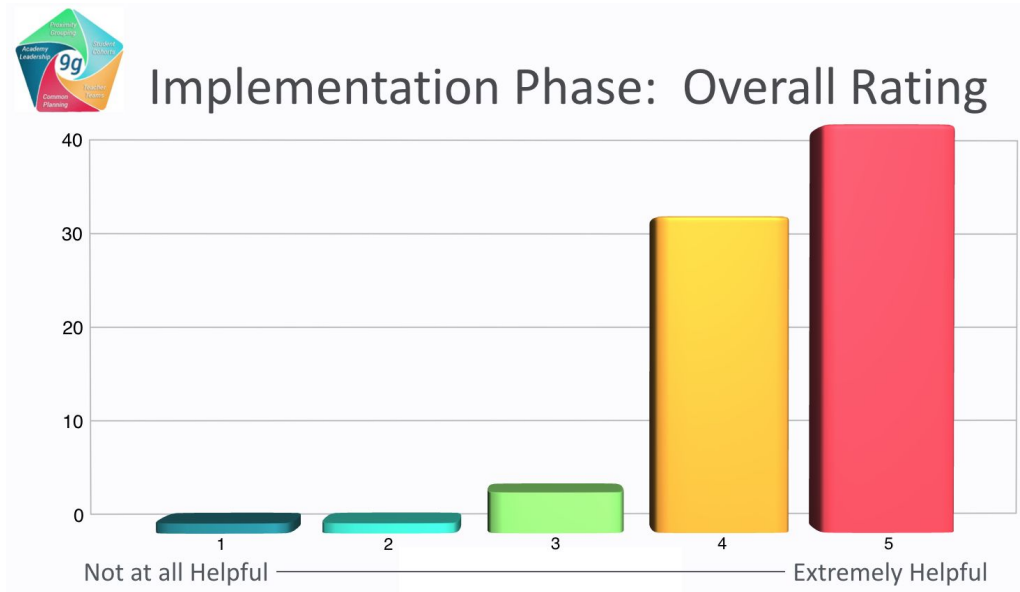
Table 9: Planning Phase Overall Rating



Within the Planning Phase section, the *Leadership Team* page was indicated by 7.9% of respondents as needing improvement, *Freshman Orientation* was indicated by 5.3%, *Master Schedule* was indicated by 34.2%, *Teacher Preparation* was indicated by 26.3%, *Counselors* 18.4% and *College Going Culture* was indicated by 36.8% of respondents as needing improvement. However, of the 38 responses provided, only six actionable suggestions were given: one each for *Leadership Team*, and *College Going Culture*, and two each for *Master Schedule* and *Counselors*. Nine of the comments provided were neutral or irrelevant to the question, and five were strictly complimentary. It was interesting that the *College Going Culture* page was indicated most often as needing improvement, yet the comments did not provide any specific actionable feedback for that page.

As indicated by Table 10 below, the Implementation section of the website was rated by 94.7% of respondents as 4 or 5. Only 5.3% rated it as a 3; there were no ratings of 1 or 2.

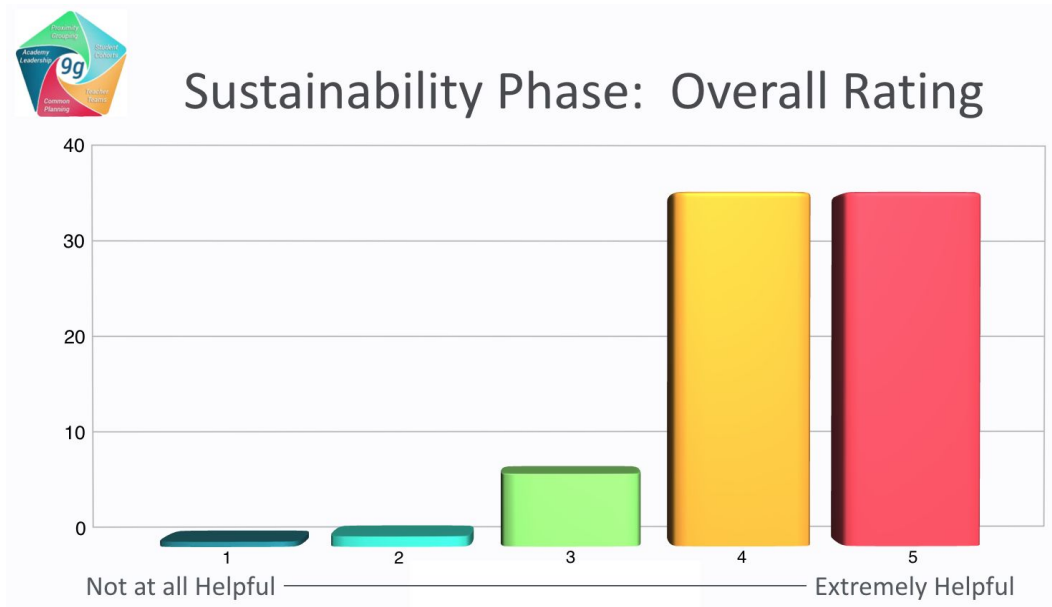
Table 10: Implementation Phase



Of the Implementation Phase pages needing improvement, *Suspended Curriculum* was indicated by 32.9%, *Ninth Grade Support Class* was indicated by 14.5%, *Ninth Grade Activities* was indicated by 19.7% and *Overview of PLCs* was indicated by 36.8% of respondents. There were 26 responses that included feedback. Of those, only eight included actionable feedback: two for *Ninth Grade Support Class*, four for *Ninth Grade Activities* and two for *Suspended Curriculum*. There were 14 responses out of the 26, that were neutral or irrelevant and two were positive comments. It was interesting that the information on the PLC page was indicated most often as needing improvement, yet the comments provided no actionable feedback for that page.

The Sustainability and Extension section was rated by 89.4% as a 4 or 5, and 9.2% as a 3. Only one person rated it as a 2 (See Table 11 below).

Table 11: Sustainability Phase

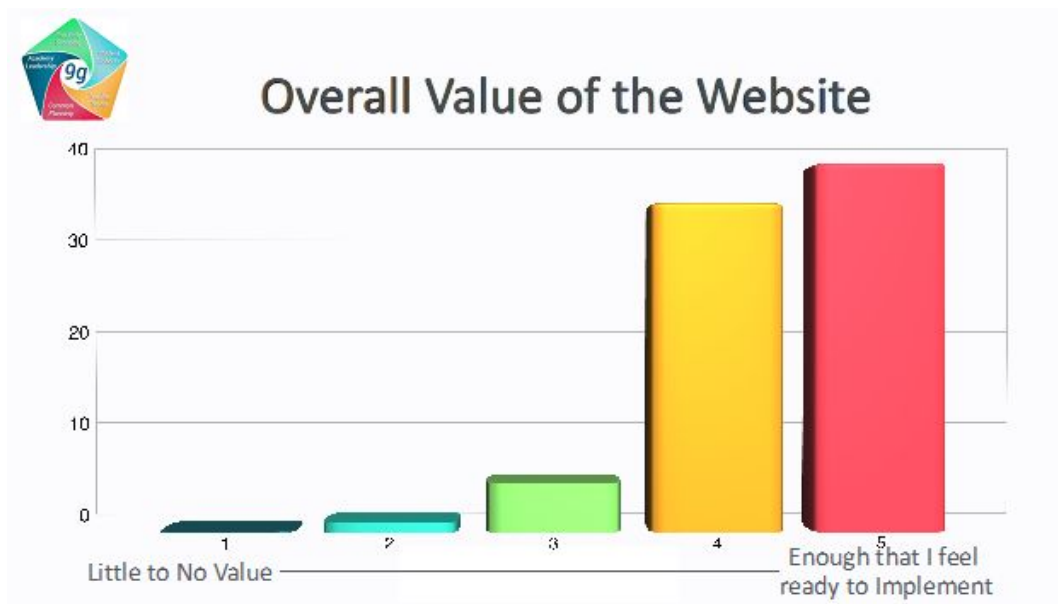


Of the pages within the Implementation Phase, 23.7% indicated *College Readiness: Grade 9 and Beyond* as needing improvement, 46.1% indicated *Summer Bridge Program* and 36.8% indicated a need for improvement of the *Grading* page. Out of 26 feedback responses, only ten included actionable feedback. Of the feedback, four suggestions were for the *Grading* page, and six were for the *Summer Bridge Programs* page. Three comments were positive and 13 were neutral or irrelevant. It was interesting that the *College Readiness* page was indicated most often as needing improvement, yet the comments did not provide any actionable feedback for this page.

Respondents were asked to use a Likert scale to determine to what degree the tools and resources provided on the website would provide value in implementing a Ninth Grade

Academy. The scaled defined 5 as “enough that I feel ready to implement” and 1 as “little to no value.” Of those responding, 48.7% rated the website as a 5, 43.4% rated it as a 4, and 6.6% rated it as a 3. Only one respondent rated the website as a 2 for value provided and none rated it as a 1 (See Table 12 below).

Table 12: Overall Value of the Website



Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to provide any additional feedback or suggestions for improvements to the website. Out of 24 comments, 13 included actionable feedback, two were neutral and nine were complimentary, indicating no need for improvement. The actionable feedback was considered and applied in part to make alterations of the website.

Conclusions

The website was geared toward administrators, but the survey was distributed among both administrators and teachers/teacher leaders. Therefore, a non-directional t-test analysis was run to determine any difference between responses provided by administrators versus those

provided by teachers/teacher leaders. There was no statistical significance between the responses provided by the two groups, indicating that both teachers and administrators were able to benefit from the website.

The findings from the analysis of survey questions validate the selection of the proposed components as effective elements of a high school transition program. Additionally, the aggregated results of the feedback provided by survey respondents showed evidence that the website was an effective method of providing information about the Ninth Grade Academy model. The survey data also indicated that the website provided adequate justification for creating a pathway to ease freshman transition, and that the general overview of the essential elements for a Ninth Grade Academy was of good quality. In balancing between the contrasting needs of brevity and sufficient detail, the feedback indicated that, while the website was thorough, there were details that could be improved and expanded upon to serve as a better guide for school leaders unfamiliar with a Ninth Grade Academy.

V. Limitations and Recommendations

Limiting factors to this study include:

- Sample Size – Although the sample size was acceptable for a qualitative study, it lacks the size necessary to satisfy the confidence level for a national study.
- Participant Selection – The selection of survey participants was not randomized, but based on the professional networks of the researchers. While this was intentional to ensure the inclusion of those with some background knowledge of

ninth grade academies so that they could give adequate feedback about the content, this factor may have skewed the results.

- Model Design – This particular model was based on data and experience from only two schools, although the strategies and components were drawn from extensive research.
- Trustworthiness – While member checking and expert review were included in the formation of the survey, the analysis did not include the triangulation of data.
- Instrument Design - As a follow up question to each of the content sections, the survey asked respondents to select the elements in need of improvement, whether in content or structure. However there was no option provided to indicate that no improvement was needed. This was a flaw in the survey design, forcing respondents to indicate that at least one page needed improvement, when they may not have felt that it did. This was evident in the results, as very little actionable feedback was provided, even when it was indicated that pages needed improvement.

An additional limitation was discovered in comparing survey responses and feedback to website analytics. There were discrepancies between the pages visited and the feedback provided. For example, according to website and survey analytics, there were 76 survey responses on the Implementation section but only 11 Implementation home page hits, indicating that some respondents may have given feedback for pages they had not reviewed or analyzed, which may have compromised the results.

Recommendations and Improvements

Based upon the actionable feedback provided by survey respondents, minor changes were made to the website. These included spelling and wording changes as well as the addition of contact information. Additionally, an explanatory video was posted that had been in the development process at the time of the website release to survey participants. The video formatting was not complete prior to the website release, but due to the timeline for data collection, it was decided by the researchers not to delay the website release for inclusion of the video. However, it was clear from the feedback provided that the video was, in fact, a necessary element, and so it was added to the website post-data collection.

The future plans for the website include updates to the pages to add missing content or clarifications as indicated by feedback provided through survey responses. Items that will be added include additional examples and testimonial videos, and information that will allow for the possibility of connecting with the research team to receive further information, consultation or professional development on implementing the 9g Ninth Grade Academy model.

With regard to future research, it is recommended to provide the improved website to a wider audience to confirm results and to determine if the improved website provides better guidance for those with limited knowledge. Website analytics could also be used to indirectly identify the value of the website by the amount of time spent on pages, or the number of page hits. An improved survey design could also include a pre- and post- evaluation of knowledge to indicate whether the website improved users' understanding of a Ninth Grade Academy.

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