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Learning Culture: First-Year Student Transition, Institutional Culture, and the Bubble of Trial Adulthood

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The transition from high school to college involves a number of social, cultural, and psychological forces. Research rarely considers how institutional culture is transmitted to students during their first year of college. This qualitative research study fills this gap in the literature by reporting the findings of 62 one-on-one interviews that considered how students made sense of their transition to higher education. Using institutional culture as a framework, data was analyzed using interpretative thematic analysis. Analysis revealed several key themes which depict the techniques students employed during their first year that enabled their re-creation and performance of the peer norms of the university's culture. Through immersion, trial and error, and mimicking peer behavior, participants navigated what they called the bubble of trial adulthood. This paper ends with discussion and implications for practice drawn from the study's themes.

The transition from high school to college is a complex confluence of psychosocial adjustment factors and external, ecological, institutional, and cultural forces. Current research on college student transition draws heavily from the field of psychology, forgoing cultural or anthropological perspectives. The first year of college, in particular, has been demarcated as a critical juncture for adjustment and transition (Goenner, Harris, & Pauls, 2013; Sax & Weintraub, 2014), the navigation of which contributes to students' decision to persist or depart (Nalbone et al., 2015). The likelihood of persisting until graduation increases significantly for students who return for their second year of college (Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). However, research has yet to consider the role of institutional culture in first-year students' transitional experiences. This research study fills this gap in the literature by exploring the cultural processes that first-year students encounter, experience, navigate, and make sense of during their college transition.

Foundational Literature

As represented in popular media and as often communicated by family and community members, transitioning to college pertains to an aspect of emerging adulthood—a period positioned between the “dependency of childhood and adolescence” and “the enduring responsibilities of adulthood” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). Within college, traditional-aged first-year students acclimate to self-management, new freedom, independence from daily parental or family supervision, new ideas, and new peers from different backgrounds (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012; Sullivan, 2014). While the new freedoms to which students acclimate imply a residential bias, it is worth noting that approximately 70% of first-time, first-year students attending four-year institutions of higher education live on campus (College Board, 2015), suggesting that these factors are highly relevant to the majority of first-year students.

Even though this transition is often welcomed by many students, there are frequent obstacles in transitioning to college life. Unhappiness, loneliness, isolation, disequilibrium, and alienation are the typical challenges associated with transition that some students encounter during this time (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Experiencing and failing to cope healthily with such challenges may produce stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and personal or emotional distress (Hicks & Heastie, 2008) and may result in attrition (Nalbone et al., 2015). LGBTQIA+ students, students of color, and students with multiple minoritized identities may face microaggressions and oppression, manifested through low expectations for student success, stereotypes, and direct discrimination (Renn & Reason, 2013; Schuster, 2017; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Transitioning to college may also produce learning shock or culture shock as some students confront unfamiliar, incongruent, discordant, or frightening episodes (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Risquez, Moore, & Morley, 2007). Feelings of discontinuity or disjuncture may exacerbate these stresses (Scanlon et al., 2007) by producing “an ‘in-between-ness’—a betwixt space—which, in turn, creates a sense of placelessness” (Palmer, O’Kane, &

Owens, 2009, p. 38). Processing through these betwixt spaces by successfully navigating turning point experiences serves as a mechanism for students to reclaim continuity.

According to Palmer et al. (2009), “turning point experiences simultaneously enrich and impoverish, liberate and constrain” (p. 50). Transitional turning points during the first college year are imbued with inherent paradox and require the renegotiation of former and current identities and relationships. For example, students confront and cope with negativity, redefine previous roles and relationships with friends and family, and forge new connections to peers and faculty. For students, constructing a clear identity affixed and proximate to these new and redefined relationships serves as a way to buttress transitional resilience (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013; Bishop & White, 2007; Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012; Scanlon et al., 2007). Social media may aid this process by allowing students to preserve their former presentations of self and virtually re-present selective and strategic aspects of their re-moored identities through an online medium (Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Struggling with anonymity during the first lecture, receiving the first feedback on a course assignment, and experiencing doubts in their abilities to successfully handle the independence of college life represent other common turning points first-year students grapple with during the transitional process (Palmer et al., 2009). As such, these transitional processes and turning point experiences frequently proceed circuitously. Transitioning to higher education, therefore, materializes as a heterogeneous and iterative process, engrained with complexly interwoven relational patterns that are effectuated by intrapersonal adjustment factors and external, ecological, institutional, and cultural forces.

Sense of belonging, sense of loyalty, sense of place, involvement, engagement, integration, institutional commitment, satisfaction, wellbeing, learning, and student development frequently intermingle in the literature and serve as outcomes through which first-year student transitional experiences are often measured (Azmitia et al., 2013; Fischer, 2007; Goenner et al., 2013; Harmening & Jacob, 2015; Hicks & Heastie, 2008; Mayhew, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2012; Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2013; Palmer et al., 2009; Strayhorn, 2012; Vianden & Barlow, 2014; Woosley & Miller, 2009). This focus, however, leaves the inherently emotional processes associated with these outcomes, such as transition, largely unexamined (Fischer, 2007; Kane, 2011; Locks et al., 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; Renn & Arnold, 2003).

Conceptual Framework

This paper employs institutional (alternately, organizational) culture as a conceptual framework to make sense of students' transitional experiences in higher education. Institutional culture focuses on culture at the organizational level as it impels and guides behavior through norms, values, ideals, and beliefs (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Institutional culture is experienced and perceived differently by each of those interacting with it. Consequently, institutional culture is never singular, and it instead becomes the confluence of internal cultural texts and external macro-cultural forces that culminate and press upon individuals (Kuh et al., 1991; Schein, 2010). In spite of its complexity, elusiveness, and multiple meanings, institutional culture serves as a useful framework for grappling with meaning-making activities in higher education settings (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Kuh et al., 2005).

Institutional culture, for this paper, is defined as an evolving context-bound set of affective and behavioral patterns that shape, mold, or persuade individuals in higher education through symbolic structures and tacit assumptions aimed at manipulating feelings, eliciting affects, inciting actions, and inculcating expectations in new members. Thus, the following research question guided this study: How do first-year students learn to enact institutional culture during their transition to higher education?

The Study

This study utilized a cultural constructivist methodology informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective. This methodology allowed for exploration of invisible cultural assumptions and beliefs that students encounter, navigate, and experience (Whitt, 1993). Rooted in constructivism and interpretive anthropology, cultural constructivism provides a methodological approach that appreciates the exploratory nature of a research design that accounts for the multiple realities of participants (Love et al., 1993; Whitt, 1993). Employing a cultural lens in this way provides new understanding of the localized processes that students experience in their first year (Christie & Dinham, 1991).

Data Collection and Analysis

For this study, I conducted 62 qualitative one-on-one interviews with student participants near the end of the 2016 academic year at an institution that I refer to as Middle Atlantic University (MAU). Interviews generally lasted for an hour and explored students' cultural experiences on campus, campus friendships, engagement opportunities, transitional challenges, and institutional connection. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The high number of interviews allowed data analysis to move toward theory building by providing richness and nuance that could not be accounted for in a smaller sample.

To analyze data, I followed the tenets of cultural constructivism, which requires the abstract interpretations of data, as opposed to descriptive reports of data, to construct deep meaning of participants' experiences (Manning, 2000). While no one data analysis strategy exists within this methodology, the focus remains on selecting a data analysis technique that allows for the application of abstract interpretations. For the present study, I utilized interpretive thematic analysis in order to allow abstract interpretations to develop and emerge from the data (Bazeley, 2013). The data analysis strategy began with me immersing myself in the data and generating initial impressions after reading transcripts. Then, I reread transcripts and developed open and descriptive codes. As open and descriptive codes were formed, I began writing analytic and reflexive memos that made conceptual connections among coded categories. This led to memo revision, interpretive theme development, and the representation of findings as themes (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2009).

Participants and Site

MAU is an urban university that enrolls about 18,000 undergraduate students. Sixty-two students from MAU finishing either their first or second year responded to a research interview invitation from a student affairs staff member serving as a gatekeeper. A little more than half of the students participating in this study were white (n = 35) and a little less than half identified as African American or Black (n = 13), Hispanic or Latinx (n = 2), Asian (n = 10), or biracial (n = 2). Most students were women (n = 37) compared to men (n= 24) or gender nonbinary (n = 1). Almost all of the students in this study were not the first members of their family to attend a higher education institution (n = 55), and seven students were the first in their families to go to college.

Table 1. Backgrounds of Quoted Participants

Pseudonym	Class Year	Gender	Race	Field of Study
Becca	1	Woman	White	Undecided
Bella	2	Woman	Asian	STEM
Chloe	1	Woman	White	STEM
Clara	1	Woman	Biracial	Undecided
Elle	2	Woman	White	STEM
Gina	1	Woman	White	STEM
Heather*	1	Woman	White	STEM
Johnny	1	Man	Asian	STEM
Jonas	1	Man	White	Humanities
Julian	1	Man	White	STEM
Kiyoshi	1	Man	Asian	STEM
Leigh	1	Woman	Black	STEM
Molly	2	Woman	White	STEM
Rahmi	1	Woman	Black	STEM
Samuel**	1	Man	Latinx	Undecided
Sophie	1	Woman	White	Humanities
Tessa***	2	Woman	Black	STEM
Vicky	1	Woman	White	Pre-Professional

* represents first-generation student
** represents student who identified as gay
*** represents student who identified as bisexual

Of the participants, 50 students were in their first year and 12 were in their second year. To align with cultural constructivism's principles of representation of multiple experiences, these populations were intentionally recruited in order to obtain variation in students' reconstructions of their experiences. Combining data from these populations provided a richer understanding of how students interpreted institutional culture during their transition to college. Specifically, students completing their second year were positioned to offer sophisticated and reflective analyses of their salient transitional experiences.

Trustworthiness and Transferability

This paper addresses trustworthiness through the process of interpretive rigor, which embraces the connection between researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Interpretive rigor reflects participants' experiences and preserves the recognition of multiple socially constructed realities (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this regard, interpretive rigor provides space for the co-construction of research findings. This is done by sharing members' interview transcripts, analytic memos, and preliminary themes with research participants for commentary and further interpretation (Bazeley, 2013). This commentary is meant to provide participants additional opportunity to reflect on the findings and to add feelings, emotions, and influential moments of personal crisis/catharsis that may be absent from initial interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). These notions of mutuality and reciprocity also situate the researcher as a necessary intervention in the research process and align with the core tenets of constructivism (Hatch, 2002). These co-created constructions produce social experiences from which transferability may be applied to research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Lincoln et al., 2011). Utilizing member checking in this manner increases trustworthiness. This allows for transferability through which readers may exercise individual judgments regarding the applicability of the research findings to their own unique situations (Mertens, 2010).

A Note on Language

Throughout the article, I use the phrase more advanced students to describe students who are in their second, third, fourth, fifth, or sixth year as an undergraduate. This phrase merely indicates students who are farther along their academic journey in terms of credit units acquired as opposed to more advanced in their thinking or intellectual capacity. In instances where participants described "upperclassmen," the original term remains to maintain the authenticity of participants' voices.

Themes

When students in the study began college, they described transitioning to a new phase of their lives. This phase signaled independence symbolized through situations like daily separation from parents or living in a residence hall, delineating college as a signifier of transition. Such a notion remained even more prominent for first-year students whose viewpoint, informed by their recent transition, centralized their independence (Arnett, 2000). As such, first-year students opened themselves to learning how to align their behaviors with institutional expectations to gain social acceptance and academic success (Tinto, 2000). Especially for students living on campus, their shifting social networks positioned campus connections as their primary interactive bases. Together, these forces informed how students embraced peer norms within the culture.

The Bubble of Trial Adulthood

Throughout the interviews, there was a prevailing view of college as distinctive or separate from past experiences and other social spheres. Participants regarded MAU as separate from the bustling urban environment that surrounded it. While there was a clear outside world that regularly interacted with the campus, time-intensive academics and student organizations defined much of first-year student life at MAU, according to students in the study. The intensity of these activities, combined with living on campus for many first-year students, impelled study participants to describe MAU as a bubble that was shielded from not only the local urban environment, but also broader society. Molly outlined the activities that occurred at MAU that distinguished it from other environments:

> It feels like college is just this bubble where you do your schoolwork, you do your social activities, and you do your clubs and organizations and then you can interact with the outside world. It’s like first you interact with your college and then you interact with everyone else...College is supposed to be preparing you for life in the rest of the world, but sometimes it feels like you’re just isolated from the rest of the world.

Molly’s perspective was representative of other participants who regarded MAU as their primary interactive base, positioning social networks and activities beyond MAU as secondary. College life represented students’ inundation with academics, on-campus friends, and student activities; students described not finding themselves interacting much with the broader communities. In this way, the institutional culture experienced by first-year students at MAU sheltered interactions from other communities and networks.

Tessa concluded, “MAU is a bubble...the campus very easily sucks up your everyday life...sometimes not realizing anything is happening outside of the campus. I would not even know that news was happening...it’s very easy to get sucked into [the bubble].” The pervasive and encompassing nature of institutional culture perpetuated for students an inside-outside dichotomy that proved to be a distinguishing element of their first year. While interactions with broader sociopolitical networks remained limited, students renegotiated regular contact with family and passive or loose communication with high school friends through social media into their campus routines. The bubble metaphor illustrates the all-encompassing nature of the campus culture, which not only directs behavior, but also demarcates insiders and outsiders. This dichotomy reinforced students’ desires to gain acceptance by learning and performing peer norms associated with fitting into the culture.

Ultimately, this dichotomy presented the world inside MAU as a changing, transitional space. This transitional space was regarded by study participants as protected from “real” responsibilities. For Chloe, college bridged two distinct periods of her life: “At MAU...You live in this little world where you have a lot of independence and free time, but no responsibilities to go with it...college connects your childhood to adulthood.” The perceived lack of responsibilities, increased independence, and ability to make decisions about how to spend free time all contributed to the distinctness that separated first-year students’ role at MAU from their roles in other networks. This perception positioned college as a transitive space of emerging adulthood that bridged childhood and adulthood (Arnett, 2000).

Sophie, meanwhile, recognized college as a transitional space by highlighting the new responsibilities she assumed by attending MAU:

> College is trial adulthood. It’s like you are kind of an adult, but you are not. It’s you figuring things out. I’m responsible for myself. I feed myself. I get my laundry...I go to class...I get up when my alarm goes off...Going to MAU is really radical, like different.

While Chloe mentioned that these responsibilities were not the salient part of defining her independence, Sophie said her performance of these tasks associated with independent living greatly defined her independence. For Sophie, these responsibilities, which she said were previously coordinated by her parents, made college feel real. Overall, individual responsibilities guided by academic, cocurricular, and social demands were described as absent from direct parental oversight, highlighting how life at MAU functioned for students.

In searching for ways to describe her experience at MAU, Becca considered MAU as an ongoing transitional space:

> College life—it's just weird that you can just go to college and live in a whole new place in this like pretend college bubble world and get a different kind of education [outside the classroom]...everything is constantly changing and new things are happening. That's exciting...[but] I don't think I've gotten used to being here yet.

Like many other students in the study, Becca said she was still finding her place on campus, learning, and adjusting to new situations, expectations, and norms even near the end of her first year. While many of these changes were exciting for participants, MAU served as an ongoing transitional space with transitional processes extending beyond an academic year for a number of students in the study.

Immersion

Interviewer: How did you learn about the way of life at MAU?
Johnny: By living it. [Laughs].

Learning institutional culture primarily occurred through daily immersion for participants in this study. Immersion provided regular and ongoing exposure to campus activities, rich with cultural meanings. Interactions in the classroom, social situations in the residence hall, student organization meetings, and campus ceremonies were just a few of the activities that contributed to the immersive nature of MAU. The vastness of what MAU life encompassed created explanatory difficulty for many participants, who troubled over explaining how they learned about life at MAU. Clara exemplified the way most of these students perceived learning the campus culture: "Learning [culture] just kind of happened through experience." This trend aligns with individuals becoming rooted within an institutional culture in ways that hinder their ability to explain or operationalize its inner workings (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Schein, 2010).

In a few cases, participants explained that the interview pressed them to consider that which they took for granted on campus. In part, this exposes how institutional culture served as a force that operated through unquestioned assumptions, even near the end of students' first year at MAU.

In separate interviews, other students enriched Clara's idea of learning institutional culture through ongoing exposure. These students described learning institutional culture as an immersive process that was not often straightforward or easy. Immersion was mostly recognized as ongoing daily interaction with campus activities, classes, and peers. Leigh described this process as rhythmic: "I think for me, the biggest thing is trying to get the rhythm of everything at MAU." Learning the rhythm of MAU amplifies the way in which institutional culture was sensed and perceived to be nonlinear, yet eventually predictable. Becca, meanwhile, compared learning institutional culture to learning a language:

> It's kind of like whenever people are learning a language, they'll just go to the country and immerse themselves in that country. Doing college is like that. You just kind of have to do it. I don't think there is necessarily anything that people can say that will prepare you for [college life]…until you walk around, you're never really going to know.

Learning by doing prepared Becca for how to appreciate the expectations of MAU and enact behavioral norms that met these expectations. Walking around to learn the institutional culture ran more deeply than merely mastering the location of campus buildings. Instead, the metaphors that Leigh and Becca employ refer to a broader range of experiences that students collect throughout their transition.

Samuel extrapolated these ideas by explaining how he "jumped into" the social aspects of MAU culture: "I tried to learn the social part of college just by practicing, going to parties." While going to parties with alcohol emerged as an activity most students in the study attended at least once and provided students with different social benefits, Samuel's comment draws attention to how parties were an opportunity for him to practice the peer social norms that he observed. Later in his interview, Samuel went on to explain how the heteronormativity appearing through the peer social scene isolated him as a gay man: "I just didn't feel comfortable around all those drunk people… all those straight couples making out at parties." While Samuel's comment highlights the exclusion that he felt on campus as a gay man, he endured the discomforts of compulsory heteronormativity because he viewed immersion as a way to fit in with peers.

Vicky employed immersion as a tactic that enabled her to learn the specifics about the institutional culture, while de-emphasizing her discomfort with leaving home:

> Immersing myself would basically be the best way for me to learn about [MAU's way of life]. It kept my mind off the big transition of leaving home and realizing MAU is my home now…I immediately started with clubs…I remember going to a bunch of random things…anything… remotely interesting…it's a good time to explore all of your options and find out what other people are doing on campus.

Time-intensive cocurricular activities were a manifestation of the MAU bubble and provided Vicky with little time to think about the significant changes to her life, while also allowing her to interact with peers and develop her interests. Immersion eased Vicky's fears associated with transitioning to higher education and served as a way to learn institutional culture. This created a situation where institutional culture was learned, new peer connections formed, individual sense of belonging increased, and fears associated with experiencing this new way of life were mitigated. In essence, immersion provided a point of departure from high school-defined routines by offering ongoing experiences within the new institutional culture. Moreover, these experiences provided opportunities, reinforcement, and affirmation to both practice and perpetuate MAU's peer culture. Overall, immersion ultimately worked as a mechanism and tactic that allowed students to learn, explore, experiment, and reconfigure their networks.

Trial and Error

Failure proved to be a phenomenon that each student in the study experienced to varying degrees. All students in the study described overcoming failures in completing their first year of college. Students experienced, learned, and rebounded from personal failures caused by misalignment between cultural expectations and their behaviors in that culture. Direct or indirect correction signaled to students this incongruence and produced negative emotions, like embarrassment. Experiencing, perceiving, making sense of, and changing future behaviors through these corrective mechanisms dispelled negative emotions for a range of abrasive cultural situations.

Failure during this transitional period was unpredictable but expected as a part of the learning process. Transitioning to a new environment, new schedule, new academic demands, and new friends left students anticipating situations or moments that would produce disjuncture. Julian curbed this disjuncture by envisioning failure as a way to build a database of information for expected future behaviors:

College is trial and error—you just got to try stuff until you figure out what works for you…it's not a routine cause I don't do the same thing every day. I think it's just like building a database you know. Taking in all this information so I just know what will work for me.

For Julian, trial and error was a way to fit within the culture while adapting personal strategies that were beneficial to his individual success. He viewed this information as a database that allowed him to broadly replicate patterns of behaviors that worked in the culture and avoid practices that resulted in incongruence. Trial and error required not only an openness toward failing and making mistakes, but also rebounding from those failures. Rahmi explained, "College is a lot of trial and error…failing bus system navigation, failing the first couple of exams. Otherwise, you won't know what you're doing wrong." Failure served as a corrective mechanism through which students conformed to new norms in order to succeed at MAU.

Trial and error with common stresses, such as going to the wrong building or not doing well on an exam, were usually presented as relatively benign. Chloe summarized this point: "Some things you have to experience. You know failing a class, getting rejected from a job. You can't really get hurt right now." As Chloe went on to say, the bubble that encapsulated the college experience also softened failures that occurred within this space. These types of activities not only provided opportunities for failure, but also future opportunities for correction, thus diminishing the impact of reverberating negativity. Students rebounded from campus failures by adjusting their behavior or attitudes to affirm their place in the culture. In other words, students perceived college failure as an opportunity to learn about their place within the institution and tactically employ trial and error to affirm that placement.

A series of adjustments may need to be made throughout the trial and error process. As Kiyoshi pointed out, “There isn’t any specific arithmetic, any specific thing that you do [in this process].” Trial and error did not offer a linear path to success yet served as an effective learning tool. Learning culture may not be the same as solving a mathematical equation, but it may provide the beats in a rhythm that allow students to anticipate the next measure or hear that they are off-key. In his interview, Johnny commented in a way that seemed to continue this line of thinking, “It almost seems counterintuitive to first experience failure and then learning from it…failing just sticks more.” The trial and error process of learning culture produced a reaction that presented a lasting memory that was stored and retrieved from the cultural database that students were constantly building and refining. Part of the effectiveness of relying on trial and error as a method for learning intricacies of the culture may relate to overcoming negative emotions associated with failures and noting times when the database was out of sync.

Other failures occurring during the trial and error process contained deeper negative emotions that some students more laboriously worked to overcome. Without a specific algorithm for experiencing academic challenges early on, Jonas expressed dissatisfaction with his grade in one of his classes:

> I withdrew from one economics class because I was struggling…it was disheartening…I had never done bad on anything before…That felt pretty shitty…because…I didn’t think that I would ever have to withdraw from a class. It was kind of a drag.

In this instance, Jonas concluded that increasing attention to his economics class and attending faculty office hours would detract from his commitment to his other classes and produce failures elsewhere. After seeking the faculty member’s guidance, Jonas learned how to better sequence this particular class by enrolling in a lower-level economics course that would prepare him to retake this course in the future. Although help-seeking behaviors supported Jonas in making sense of this failure, he still had not envisioned struggling or needing to withdraw from a course because of the expectations generated from his high school experiences. Even after receiving guidance from the faculty member, Jonas still dealt with overcoming the negative emotion by internally detailing a plan to avoid course withdrawal in the future by finding faculty help or tutoring earlier.

Processing these negative emotions and overcoming friction encountered within the culture left students who experienced these failures with empowering views of their perseverance. Gina experienced friction with the culture as she struggled to succeed academically and find engaging campus activities: “I’m proud of how hard I worked my first year. I’m proud of my attitude…I’m proud, you know, getting back up again after I was kind of knocked down over and over again.” As reflected in many interviews, the perseverance embodied by Gina led to trial and error being an empowering script of personal perseverance.

Mirroring Peers

Students also learned institutional culture through the messages they received from peers and the behaviors they observed on campus. Observing and internalizing these messages created a situation where students mirrored peers’ behaviors in order to align with peer cultural norms. Mirroring behavior both contrasts with and complements immersion, requiring increased situational awareness and astuteness. This technique for learning culture expressed students’ desire to fit in and perform the culture “correctly.” Doing so eased transitional anxieties. In a sense, this method of cultural transmission expedited or avoided trial and error processes. This is not to say that students who mirrored behavior did not use trial and error. Instead, immersion, trial and error, and mirroring worked together in learning peer norms of institutional culture.

Through observations, others’ behaviors signaled the ways first-year students should enact and perform MAU culture. This particular method of learning culture provided an added layer of safety and support that was absent from trial and error. In essence, mirroring allowed students to observe their peers’ behaviors before replicating. This technique seemed to be most meaningful during the initial transition from high school to college when anxieties about fitting in and succeeding ran high. First-year students regarded the experiences of more advanced students as they navigated their transition and searched for clues on how to handle college life. Such experiences were considered valid because more advanced students had processed through their first year at MAU and were farther along their academic journey. First-year students inferred that more advanced students held institutional knowledge that had been learned during their time at MAU. Establishing a relationship with a more advanced student, typically a resident assistant or orientation mentor, was generally important to study participants because it exposed them to implicit and explicit messages about norms for peer behavior. Jonas recollected an early conversation he had with his resident assistant about bridging the academic and social spheres of campus:

One of the first things my RA [resident assistant] said is, "Don't major shame anybody because if anyone was major shaming or talking shit about your major, just come tell me and I'll like straighten them out cause it's bullshit…Nobody cares about your test scores in high school, and don't brag about them. Like keep that separate." Both were nice things to hear…but it is just a good thing to know that that's understood as being kind of like not a good thing to do.

Jonas's resident assistant gave direct messages about norms for appropriate peer behavior at MAU. These messages enforced a standard where all academic pursuits were equal and high school academic successes were meant to be private. This message promoted a sense of academic equality among students at MAU and provided Jonas and his floormates with rules for engaging with peers on academic topics.

Heather looked to others, especially students in their second or third years, for clues and messages about how to master college life:

> At the very beginning, I was just kind of watching and seeing how other people worked and not necessarily just jumping in and doing it…I could kind of watch and see [how they did it]…asking RAs, asking any of my friends that were upperclassmen like how can I do something, what can I do…the upperclassmen kind of learned [college life] the same way, and they can teach now because they had the opportunities and experiences, and now they can show us how they did it.

Instead of immediately immersing herself in the culture and performing, Heather relied on her relationships with more advanced students and observations to determine how others were successful in college life. Within this perspective, students with experience at MAU possessed knowledge that was valuable because they had succeeded in completing their first years at MAU. Consequently, Heather implicitly concluded that these students' experiences were worthy of replicating and could result in similar outcomes.

Heather followed up this sentiment by saying, “Observing is a comfort thing. I think it makes everyone feel comfortable knowing that someone else did it too.” Therefore, observing before performing provided a sense of security that bolstered confidence and curbed anxiety. Ultimately, it furnished first-year students with a sense of possibility as well as elements of a blueprint for success in transitioning to college life.

Observing others’ behaviors was especially prominent during the initial transition from high school to college when students experienced anxieties related to belonging and making friends. Students did not want to do something incorrectly and endure social consequences that could lead to not making friends. These anxieties led students who mirrored behaviors to observe even mundane routines before attempting them on their own, as Bella said:

I learned the way of life at MAU by just following others’ lead…I mean if I walked into a class…I would look around and evaluate my surroundings and see what other people were doing. Did they take out their notebook right away? Do they just sit there and stare? Do they have stuff on their desk? It just makes me at ease to do what they’re doing…make sure I’m not like too far off.

Bella observed first before replicating peers’ behavior. Bella explained that she employed these observational techniques heavily during her initial college transition. As she progressed throughout the rest of her first year and into her second year, she said she gained confidence and stopped looking to others’ behaviors for validation. This technique initially aided Bella in reducing the uncertainty about college life that she experienced in her early transition to MAU.

Observing others’ behaviors with the desire to fit in assumed that peer norms could be performed correctly and that operating outside this norm may invite unwarranted negative attention. Molly described a behavioral instance of the embarrassment incurred by making a performative gaffe: “Wearing your ID tag on a lanyard—like no one does that…you see a [first-year] student doing it, and you’re like—Aww man! That kid doesn’t know what he’s doing.” In this way, Molly noted how seemingly small details about displaying a student ID might invite unwelcome and even unknown negative attention that casts first-year students as novices. Elle noted another behavior that distinguished first-year students:

> A lot of freshmen will…walk up and down the streets looking for a place that appears to have a party...that's definitely a very first semester freshman activity…I don't think I ever did that. I only went to parties I was invited to…but [looking for a party] definitely a freshman faux pas…having a connection to the party is very important because then you know where you're actually going…they don't know where to go…it's kind of a joke for the older people to laugh at.

While stressing that she had never breached etiquette by engaging in this behavior, Elle explained that first-year students looking for parties highlighted their status as novices and magnified their still-forming social connections. This contrasted with the experiences of more advanced students, some of whom asserted social superiority because of their established social networks. Attending a party implicitly represented the breadth of one's social network and conferred status within the culture, and more advanced students directly or indirectly policed this behavior.

Chloe surveyed more advanced students through observation to discern their behaviors and outcomes:

> I like…seeing upperclassmen, seeing how their lives are going, seeing this person went to class every day, didn't party at all, and now is going off to one of the best med schools in the nation…Internalizing that as okay this is what I want for my life…trying to emulate people who are what you want.

Observation of more advanced students' behaviors led to internalization and either emulation or avoidance. Chloe emulated the behavior of her peers who achieved outcomes that aligned with her goals. Therefore, more advanced students played pivotal roles in the cultural transmission process for first-year students because they were often looked to for cues on how peer norms should be enacted.

Discussion

This research relates to several key areas of discussion and can be used to generate practical implications for orientation, transition, and retention (OTR) professionals. First, this study fills a necessary gap in the literature by utilizing institutional culture as a framework for representing the transitional processes that college students encounter during their first year (Fischer, 2007; Kane, 2011). Second, students in this study viewed their transition to college as a distinctive period of their lives, theoretically connecting to Arnett's (2000) emerging adulthood. In that regard, this study contributes nuance to how the concepts of emerging adulthood and college transition intertwine. Borrowing students' metaphor of college life as a bubble partitioned from broader society can support educators and scholars in understanding how beginning college serves as a point of departure from first-year students' previous normality and signals to them openness, possibility, and transition. Related to the literature on discontinuity (Scanlon et al., 2007) and turning point experiences (Palmer et al., 2009), this research shows that disjuncture, when anticipated, can aid in the formulation of personal resilience during transition.

Third, this study deepens the literature by enriching our understanding of the specific ways culture is transmitted to new students. Learning institutional culture in the present study was an ongoing process that occurred throughout a student's first year in higher education, relating to the notion that students transition through their entire first year. This study adds to that conceptualization of student transition by suggesting students transition to an institution through (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012) and beyond their first year. Learning and enacting culture occurred for students in the study through immersion, trial and error, and mirroring more advanced students' behaviors. This research supports findings from numerous studies that peers play crucial roles in influencing other peers' behaviors (e.g. Astin, 1993). In particular, this study speaks to the importance and value that first-year students place upon the lived experiences of peers who already completed their first year at the same institution. While these are the prominent ways that students in this study learned institutional culture, there are other mechanisms through which students receive information about cultural artifacts, values, ideals, and beliefs (Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Schein, 2010; Manning, 1993).

Implications

Findings from this study can be translated to practice in several ways. Recognizing that transitioning to university life is not confined to a single academic year, OTR professionals could develop partnerships and programs that continue OTR work into students' second year of college. Intentional second-year experience programming, informed by current research, could continue to support students in acclimating to higher education. While students' first year of college might focus on orientation to the institution through extended sessions that provide opportunities to develop peer social networks, understand academic expectations and norms, and participate in diversity initiatives, students' second year of college might focus on programs that support academic goal refinement, career exploration, as well as substantial engagement in service learning, leadership development, or social justice organizing. Moving in this direction requires us to expand our orientation and transition mindset.

In addition, OTR professionals should look at the formalized peer mentor and student leader roles that exist within and outside their functional areas. Collaborating with other campus offices and departments on the training and development of students serving as tour guides, peer mentors, resident assistants, and orientation leaders creates new opportunities to prepare students serving in these roles with consistent messages about their responsibilities as peer socialization agents. Offering joint training workshops may produce positive outcomes in intergroup collaboration for students selected for these roles and consolidate some budgetary resources for departments. More important, this would allow the institution to streamline its messaging about its values and culture. OTR professionals giving the space for student leaders to personalize and problematize these values through their unique lived experiences is important for ensuring authenticity in these messages.

To support student leaders in engaging in personal reflection and conversations about their campus roles, a training exercise might involve OTR staff taking student leaders on cultural walking tours of campus to locations and spaces that represent key institutional values. From there, student leaders could individually reflect upon and share their campus experiences as they relate to that value of the institutional culture. This exercise could deepen student leaders' intrinsic awareness and connect to institutional priorities. Based on the study's themes, peer leaders would best support first-year students best when sharing their experiences with failure and resilience as well as the necessity of social justice and inclusion. While it might feel natural to only focus on the positive aspects of institutional culture, exploring contested or incongruent campus values with student leaders in this forum can provide valuable insight into areas of the culture that produce exclusion. Engaging in these conversations with student leaders (as well as through assessments that analyze disaggregated data based on race, gender, and sexual orientation identity) is vital for OTR professionals in ensuring that trans* students, LGBQ+ students, women students, students of color, first-generation students and students with intersecting minoritized identities are affirmed, supported, represented, and centralized in academic and social spheres of their institution.

Finally, because first-year students rely so heavily on the influence of more advanced peers, OTR professionals could create channels through which first-year students become empowered as creators of institutional culture. Giving first-year students support in establishing new student organizations, new initiatives, or updated traditions would position first-year students as drivers of culture instead of passive receivers of it.

Conclusion

Two considerations must be given in transferring this research to other institutional contexts. First, the sample represents a highly residential population and nearly all participants lived in campus residence halls during their first year at MAU. Translating implications from this research for non-traditional, transfer, and commuter students should be done so carefully.

Second, the purpose of this paper was not to represent the variation in college students' transition. However, extensive literature demonstrates that there are significant differences in the attainment of collegiate outcomes based on race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation identity, class, ability, and first-generation status (e.g. Renn & Reason, 2013). Therefore, OTR professionals should construct programs that reflect the diversity of their campus populations and that adhere to the principles of social justice and equity. Assuming homogeneity when planning orientation and campus programming will likely contribute to the isolation and marginalization of first-year students with minoritized identities (Schuster, 2017). Centralizing the experiences of diverse students within OTR functional areas is essential in constructing institutional cultures that champion equity and success for broader populations of students.

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