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Final Report

First Year Experience of Women

Assessment Objective

At many of today's colleges and universities a significant amount of time and money go into orientation programs. The experience of first years and transfers into college is important in understanding campus culture, making necessary changes, and allocating resources appropriately. In addition, it is important to assess experiences of specific student groups as the student populations become more diverse. In this study, I have inquired after the experience of first year women during orientation and move-in weekend. What is their relationship like with peer leaders and staff? Did they feel safe on the campus? Did they trust leadership? What contributed to their sense of belonging to the university community? By conducting a constructivist inquiry, I was able to hear the individual stories and experiences of the women involved. Did the programs and events of orientation meet the needs of these women?

Perspective/Limitations of Study

I was somewhat removed and unknowledgeable of the student's experience, not being an alumna at this particular university. I prefaced the first focus group with my role as a graduate student who was interested in hearing their stories in hopes of understanding student life at their college. In addition to my own interest, I would report my findings to the director of orientation programs. I also assumed the role as director of the women's resource center where the primary goal is to create programs promoting female development and provide a safe place for individuals to grow in their awareness and knowledge of gender experience and issues.

Before entering into the assessment with the young women, I realized that I value the significantly different experience females have in college compared to the experience of males. While women are of the majority at this institution, they do not represent the dominant views or values. In addition, I work under the assumption that a predominantly white male perspective, even more evident at this particular institution, has influenced many programs and learning objectives for students. Moreover I value, based on personal experience and in research, relationships and the influence they have on the development of young woman. I also assumed the participants would be in certain places developmentally, influencing their ability to answer questions freely and without reservations.

Literature Review

The unique experience of college females is supported in literature and theory and is most evident in learning styles, relationships and awareness of campus environment. First year orientation programs should adequately serve the way women learn, perceive experience and make meaning of the college years. Secondly, trends and studies of transition into college should influence the work of faculty and staff.

A recent insight into college life states the high-pressure women feel to be perfect (Landphair, 2007). Female students revealed the desire to live up to certain expectations pertaining to relationships, grades, and social life. Surprisingly, women in difficult times are shameful and lonely; many hesitate to share experience with friends and be in community. The women find themselves in an environment that

celebrates individuality and competition. Consequently their identity development suffers and they have poor relationships with peers.

Relationships are an important factor in the development of women (Gilligan, 1993). Successful women are those who know their voice, feel confident to create goals and understand their purpose in life. In college years, relationships with family, peers and faculty greatly influence the way women perceive themselves and find purpose and voice. Baxter Magolda's (2001) understanding of self-authorship is connected to voice, the ability to make meaning and understand experience. This is something that professionals must learn to foster in order to encourage student development. Moreover, the quality of relationships is positively and significantly associated with university engagement and satisfaction (Heister, Nordstrom, & Swenson, 2008). Healthy relationships contribute to the confidence levels in classroom participation and easy transition into college life. The first year orientation program is a time to foster those important relationships, inform women of resources, and ease the transition into college.

The findings of Colbeck (2001) reinforce the role faculty and staff play in building confidence and a positive self-esteem. Peers and faculty must validate females emotionally and intellectually (Crombie et al., 2003). This validation builds self-esteem. Student engagement immediately in the first year of college is directly related to their self-esteem (Allen & Taylor, 2006). Those who had high levels of self-esteem and confidence in ability reported having specific goals. Again, self-efficacy and self-esteem are directly linked with student achievement and success

(Cabrera, Colbeck & Terenzini, 2001). Confident females improved their studies and achieved at greater levels.

Unfortunately there is ample amount of literature on classroom climate and experiences of students based on gender that do not validate but rather discourage female engagement. Literature shows that the way females learn and make meaning of experience is in fact different than males. According to Taylor (1996) “women learn better in climates of cooperation rather than competition” (p 58). Confidence and motivation women find in community and relationships are significant predictors in the success of female students. Furthermore our current college settings are not conducive to this learning environment. Some studies have indicated that certain college experiences can have a negative effect on women’s personal and intellectual development. The impact of women’s perceptions of a chilly campus climate negatively impacts goals and engagement (Whit et al., 2003). Moreover, a debilitating learning environment negatively influences identity achievement (Rund, 2008).

As previously discussed, women achieve higher goals and are more confident in environments focused on collaboration rather than competition (Taylor, 1996). Detailed research from Persaud and Salter (2003) use personality trends based on the Myers Brigg assessment to help examine the way females are more likely to interact in the classroom with peers and faculty. Those females who tested as having the “feeling” trait are found to have a completely different experience than men with the same trait. Such factors as structure of classroom discussion can alter engagement and cooperation. Furthermore, females tend to be more aware of and

sensitive to how others may perceive their classroom performance (Bundy & Tiggemann, 2008). These perceptions according to Clark (2005) directly affect the adjustment to college life. It soon becomes a cycle of poor self-esteem and confidence in the classroom; females feel less than perfect which affects peer relationships. Unfortunately these relationships are so important to the success of college.

Thus the very idea of inequity in higher education calls for a change in the way we structure our learning environments (Whit et al., 2003). Though first year orientation programs are considered co-curricular or outside of the classroom experiences for students, the trends and findings of Bundy & Tiggemann (2008) are applicable in understanding female perception of the university and college programs. Student affairs professionals must take into consideration these different styles to improve our services of support (Persaud & Salter, 2003). The orientation programs are the first impressions of university culture and lifestyle. They should be instructional and yet be structured in a way that meets the specific needs of women.

In the broader developmental picture, when women learn to communicate and reflect on their experience, they are closer to self-authorship. Conversation fosters a self-awareness of experience and influences, and encourages an intellectual maturity towards relationships (Baxter Magolda, 2004). Emotional clarity was a direct result of being participants in a research project (Ganns, Johnson, Kerr, & Krumrine, 2004). In the development of women as students, it is important to account for the individual motivation to engage in learning. It is a

partnership between the student and the professional. The student's role is to actively engage, to take initiative and responsibility, and to reflect on one's sense of self (Baxter Magolda, 2002). It is the role of the professional to provide opportunities to succeed and build a community that supports the learning styles of women.

Descriptive Information

The participants of the study were six freshmen women at a private Christian four-year university in Southern California. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, out of the 4,858 undergraduate students at this university, 64% are female. I initiated contact with one participant who happened to serve as a volunteer in my office. From there the participant was able to ask and recruit her fellow peers and friends to be a part of the study. Besides the one, I had no previous relationship with the women before the assessment. Five of the females were white; one participant was Asian American. Five of the females were raised in and considered home to be in Northern California. The remaining individual was raised locally in Southern California about 45 minutes away from the university. Out of the participants, three of the women lived in the same dorm and hall; the three others lived in a different dorm on campus where two of them happened to be roommates. None of the girls were friends before coming to college. Interestingly for such a small university, none of the participants had parents, friends or family at the university. Two of the women were involved with athletic teams at the university. Three women had declared their major and were on the academic track for nursing school. All six together formed a focus group for the first interview. I then set up

separate and individual interviews with each of the girls. After making appointments with all six, there was only one who never showed to participate in the personal interview.

Analysis of Themes

A major theme was the perception of campus environment and the personality of people. Overall the experience was described as fun, friendly and very active. The women felt comfortable and welcome in their dorms and at every event. "I feel like everyone is friendly here, so it's not difficult to meet people here, it's easier over freshmen orientation because everyone was going around and introducing themselves." Another student made this comment about her RA. "I see her walking between campuses so she like always says hi to."

In addition the experience with move-in and that first weekend were positive. As they women expressed the anxiety they had with that initial move-in and unpacking they were relieved with the amount of help. "You are already stressed, but they carried everything up." Another commentary was "Move in is well coordinated and you feel welcome." This positive experience was due to the many individuals, students and staff that were willing to offer help and assistance.

Unfortunately one of the participants expressed a negative interaction with move-in staff. She was neither helped at her car nor inside the building. Too add to the misfortune, she was the one participant that represented a minority group on campus. One would hope that the lack of help and assistance was not due to her ethnicity, but it would be important for student leaders to be aware of such an incident.

Secondly, the overarching theme found among all the women was the importance and influence that personal interaction had on their first year experience. Peers and staff play a significant role in encouraging involvement and building confidence (Crombie et al., 2003). “There are constant new people, and hopefully new friends but you just want to go and hang out with them, rather than being with people you just don’t know constantly.” Seeing that personal interaction was such an important factor in their first impression and sense of belonging at APU, I found it necessary to further explore the relationship the women had with their RA’s and Alpha Leaders. Rather than gather a new focus group, I invited the young women to share more of their experience with me in personal interviews. This allowed space for them to feel safe and to say what they may not have said in the focus groups.

Concerning the RA’s and Alpha Leaders, the women valued these relationships and thought very highly of these individuals. “She’s so sweet....I love her.” Another comment was, “Yay, she is really open which makes me want to be really open.” Even if they were not particularly close with their peer leader they acknowledged this relationship was important. One participant noted, “I am not really close to her, I feel like I should be more, it’s good because she could be like a mentor.”

None of the participants had relationships with staff or faculty, making those with peers so significant and important. For the most part all were engaged and connected through athletic teams and academic goals. When asked about the factors that contributed to their sense of belonging, all agreed their new friendships

were important. “uhhh, they’re uhhh growing, I mean at first it was just like ok there is somebody to talk to but now they are getting deeper and I feel more comfortable sharing things with them.” In additions their relationships with friends from back home were significant. Facebook became a common approach to maintaining old friends and finding new ones.

The women expressed feelings of being too busy to attend hall meetings and meet peers as the school year resumed; they were more willing to attend such events at the beginning of the school year. “A sharp change from orientation and school week, now it’s hard to meet people.” Another student commented, “Uh, I well try to go to the events as much as I can but sometimes I have class and other things.”

One theme that came up in both the focus group and personal interviews was an overall positive sense of physical safety. There was no sense of a “chilly climate” (Whit et al., 2003). Because none of the young women had been to the campus before, this particular finding is important in understanding their experience those first couple of days. For the most all agreed that campus safety was influential in their sense of safety. “Yes because campus safety is in this building, the cars are always around, they are all around.” In addition, the number of faces they saw that first day and week as well as the relationships they had established with their peer leaders also influenced their safety. “I could go to definitely my alpha leader and my RA and even my hall director, comfortable going to anybody, any adult even if I don’t know them, because I feel like you know, they are always here I feel safe.” In addition to physical safety, they also showed great amounts of trust towards their

new friends. All expressed a willingness to trust friends and leaders with problems and concerns.

Suggestions for Practice

The overall satisfaction with the orientation experience and the sense of belonging that the women felt with the university may imply that little change in practice would need to be suggested. Yet under the umbrella of female student development, it would be wise to consider and anticipate the future experience and needs of these women. Moreover, the assessment may be limited in gathering the full experience. In telling their stories, many women developmentally may not have the capacity to be critical of their environment and might be more concerned with saying the appropriate and socially accepted response (Landphair, 2007).

As far as their experience with the orientation events, one suggestion is to be intentional about those first meetings with RA's and Alpha Leaders. Each one of the women found value in these interactions. Orientation and resident life staff can create a space, time or event where students can meet their peer leaders on a much smaller scale. The overall perception of the orientation experience seemed to have great breadth of interactions but little depth. By encouraging peer leaders to be sincere in their interactions and consider the importance they play in orientation experience, first year students may feel less overwhelmed by new faces and names.

There are some practical suggestions from basic observations of the assessment. Considering that many first years do not have cars, providing information about public transportation or helpful local walking distance shopping tips may help ease the anxiety and concern both parents and students have.

Creating programs that address family and parent involvement would also be important to the student experience. Facebook is an important medium for the students. Creating facebook groups prior to arriving may help students feel connected to their fellow peers and confident in their new environment.

Furthermore the assessment revealed that female students need significant interactions after their orientation experience. The first eventful weeks with numerous programs and social activities, may be an unrealistic expectation for the women to uphold. The women expressed feelings of being too busy to attend hall meetings and meet peers as the school year resumed; they were more willing to attend such events at the beginning of the school year. Ultimately what the women need is clear expectation and example of time management and scheduling. Such knowledge supports intentional interactions with the residential hall and peers during the first orientation weekend, which would establish a community for the remainder of the year.

Lastly it is important for women to self reflect and make meaning of their experience in order to be confident of their purpose and identity as a woman (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Gilligan, 1993). In this assessment, I played a significant role in asking questions and ultimately caring about their experience. Staff and faculty should show interest in student experience. This may look different depending on your position and the office you work in, but setting aside space to listen to student experience will reveal needs and expectations of your students thus informing the changes which should be made. Additionally, it may validate their feelings and experience and contribute to their overall development.

Summary

As theory and research have found, the developmental needs and environmental perspectives of females differ from that of males (Taylor, 1996; Persaud and Salter, 2003; Crombie et al., 2003). Thus assessing first year orientation programs through female experience is important in allocating resources appropriately, meeting the needs of all students, and providing an environment that fosters learning and healthy development.

In this assessment, I have listened to the individual stories of six first year women and their experience with orientation programs. Through a constructivist approach to research, I have found concurrent themes. The women were positive about and greatly valued their interactions with leaders, RA's and alpha (orientation) leaders upon their arrival to the university. They found significant and trusting relationships with peers, whether in their dorms or orientation groups. In general the women felt physically safe on their campus. As the school year progressed they experienced busy schedules, which negatively affected their interactions with friends and leaders.

The women's involvement with the study validated their experience and asked questions that promoted self-awareness. It is important for women to self reflect and make meaning of their experience in order to be confident of their purpose and identity as a woman (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Gilligan, 1993). Student service professionals should be aware of the experiences of these women to better promote healthy development during orientation programs.

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