

BRIDGING STUDENTS – SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

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Abstract

Transitioning from secondary school to college is an important developmental milestone that holds the potential for personal growth and behavioral change (Fromme, 2008). It involves changes in roles, additional challenges and responsibilities, be it academic or social (Conley et al., 2014). However, secondary school students often enter college unprepared for what is expected of them because their high school experiences often fail to prepare them for postsecondary education (Bangser, 2008). Key stressors for college students include personal freedom, college instructors and instructions, programme structures as well as testing and grades (Johnston, 2010). In addition to the stressors, students are not equipped with the skills required for successful college transition. These skills include academic skills, self-understanding (metacognition), self-advocacy, executive function, motivation and confidence, key cognitive strategies and key knowledge about post-secondary education (Johnston, 2010; Landmark College, 2009).

This paper embarks on a study specifically sought to identify transitional barriers faced by postsecondary students who are enrolled in the Pre-University programmes at Sunway College Johor Bahru. The outcome would also highlight the inadequacies of their pre-college preparation years and their lack of crucial skills to survive the college years. It is our hope that through this effort, we are able to establish approaches to support students in making a successful transition from high school to college. Successful transition is imperative because the benefits of postsecondary education are compelling. For an individual, this means getting jobs with higher wages and career advancement opportunities. For the country, this means a productive workforce and international competitiveness. Hence, successful transition to college should be a challenge shouldered by all parties, including policy makers, teachers and parents.

Keywords: Transition, college preparedness, school, bridging

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Preparing postsecondary students for college is a complex and challenging undertaking for college educators due to the major differences in the nature of the two types of education system and the expected learning styles. In fact, the students are accustomed to the traditional teaching approaches employed in secondary schools that are no longer effective in equipping them to face various challenges as they transit to college. In addition, an outstanding result in the secondary school formal examination is no longer an appropriate indication of the actual capacity of a student. The following table outlines the major differences between high school and college and these are the key stressors that affect student performance and success.

Table 1: Major differences between high school and college (Johnston, 2010)

Key Differences	High School	College
Personal Freedom	Highly structured and scheduled, no “free choice”	Less monitoring, students have the freedom to make ethical and moral decisions socially and academically.
College Instructors and Instructions	Expert in the field and teaching pedagogy. Instructors drive the learning	Expert in the field, not necessarily expert in teaching. Instructors are facilitators.
Programme Structure	Low amount of reading assignments, materials given in class are taught thoroughly.	High amount of reading assignments, materials are mostly not taught and teachers expect that the knowledge has been assumed.
Testing and Grades	Examination tests on retrieval and comprehension.	Examination tests on knowledge utilisation and analysis.

These major differences are the barriers that cause high school students to struggle with various academic and psychological issues during transitional college years. Studies have indicated that college readiness is highly dependent upon seven crucial skills as stated in the table below.

Table 2: Skills Required for Successful Transition (Johnston, 2010; Landmark College, 2009)

Skill Required for Successful Transition	
Academic Skills	The possession of critical key content knowledge and the ability to read and write independently
Self-Understanding (Metacognition)	The understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses
Key Cognitive Strategies	The ability to analyse and think out of the box
Self-Advocacy	The ability to recognise the need to acquire help independently
Executive Functions	The possession of key self-management skills
Motivation and Confidence	The ability to set goals and attain them
Key Knowledge about post-secondary education	The knowledge of the expectations required in college (i.e financially, academically and socially)

Armed with the knowledge of these core skills, college students will be more prepared for the challenges that they will face and more ready to identify areas where additional support and development may be needed.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Aimed at first semester students of the Monash University Foundation Year, Cambridge G.C.E. A-Levels and Australian Matriculation programmes at Sunway College Johor Bahru, a survey was carried out to determine whether the students possess the 7 skills needed to cope with the main stressors in college. Participants are required to make qualitative judgment over a list of 38 criteria and their responses would indicate the level of skills possessed. The results were analysed quantitatively using means and Spearman's Bivariate analysis.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study shows that students struggle mainly in four areas which are academic skills, executive functions, motivation and confidence and key cognitive strategies. In the academic skills area, most students were struggling with the area of summary, vocabulary and understanding, the grasping of critical concepts taught and the inability to bridge the knowledge gap from high school to college. It is also worthy to note that almost 90% of the correspondents have indicated that they do not do prior reading before attending classes. This is an alarming figure because pre-reading is vital in college as students are expected to study 2-3 hours for every hour spent in class to be able to cope (Johnston, 2010). Another noteworthy observation is that 70% of the participants indicated that their prior knowledge attained during their high school years is insufficient for them to bridge the gap to college.

In the area of executive functions, students were not able to focus on difficult tasks or tasks that do not interest them. In addition, most of the participants did not have a strategy to follow through to the completion of a task and do not have a system to keep track of a massive amount of information. These tasks require the skills of self-management, a skill that individuals must develop in order to succeed.

Students also struggle with issues of motivation and confidence. Most students have indicated that they are not confident in achieving the grades that they need to move forward and would put off trying to solve difficult academic problems whenever they arise. Struggling in this area means that students are unlikely to take advantage of the resources necessary to be successful and are likely to give up, give poor excuses for the unsuccessful completion of their work, have disciplinary issues and play truant.

Perhaps the greatest challenge for students would be in the area of key cognitive strategies. Students struggle with all the criteria listed in this category which includes the inability to solve non routine problems, understanding and evaluating conflicting explanations, evaluating the credibility of materials, thinking analytically and logically, exercising precision and applying what they have learnt into solving problems. The ability to analyse and solve non routine issues will be one of the most important indicators of success because the final examination questions and coursework in the Pre-University programmes require the highest level of cognitive process, which is knowledge utilisation.

It is also important to note that there is no correlation between the students' capabilities to cope with college life and their previous academic achievements. This means that previous academic achievement is not an accurate predictor of college readiness and success. Knowing this important finding should assist educators in avoiding stereotyping students according to their previous academic achievements.

4.0 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A recent finding reported by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2010) has revealed the vital impacts that an educator has in promoting successful transition to university and working life. Thus, apart from textbook knowledge, educators should constantly prepare students to meet the expectations and to carry out the responsibilities of a college student. Conscious effort must be made to reiterate basic concepts during the first few weeks of teaching and encourage the development of effective reading. In the area of executive functions, educators should provide a workable system for time management, setting priorities, note-taking, effective listening, and follow through strategies.

To motivate students and to help students reach their potential, educators must demand high performance (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). These demands must be communicated clearly, deliberately and consistently. Unfortunately, educators often judge the inabilities of a student too quickly and this belief quietly seeps through to the students which in turn impairs their motivation for learning

and success. Conversely, students attest to the powerful effect of faculty and advisors who believe in their potential and hold high expectations for their performance (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). At the same time, educators are expected to assure and provide productive feedback which will allow students to identify their strengths and weaknesses, consequently helping them to improve and succeed.

To improve key cognitive strategies, educators should promote active and engaged learning; as well as emphasise deep learning to assist students in acquiring and retaining more information. Students have higher tendencies to persist and succeed at higher level when they are actively involved in learning rather than passively receiving information (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2010). Intertwined lectures with group work, out of the class visits, videos and activities to expand students' understanding by making connections across disciplines which promote the application of knowledge in non-routine situations.

Instilling important “survival” skills could be difficult for an educator with time constraints, but a good balance between a demanding and supportive teacher often helps students to cultivate the necessary skills required for successful college completion. Many times, establishing good rapport with students puts educators in a more advantageous position to stimulate students to develop skills needed for college survival.

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