

ABSTRACT

“I Am Going to College...Now What?!”: Becoming a College Student

by

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College enrollment rates are increasing across the nation at both 2-year and 4-year institutions (NCES, 2015). Nearly two-thirds of undergraduate students are under the age of 25 and enrollment numbers are increasing for each racial and ethnic group (NCES, 2012). The first year of college is often a critical time for growth and development for students who are transitioning from high school to college. As such, there is a call to restructure the first year of college by fostering student success (Tinto, 1993, 2002). This call is, however, in response to limited knowledge of the transition to college from students' perspectives. Before we can restructure, scholars and educators need to understand the transition to college: the process of *becoming* a college student. This dissertation study investigates how students make sense of their experience and process of *becoming* college students over time.

This study examined the transition to college from the perspective of a diverse group of first-time college students from a large urban city university. Student narratives across multiple genres (i.e., letter to self, define a college student, and bio for website) in conjunction with responses to a questionnaire about expectations and experiences were elicited at two critical time points: prior to attending college and after the completion of the first semester. Prior to attending college, 25 students participated in the study. Twenty of these students participated after the

completion of the first semester. Faculty (n=5) narratives and the college's mission statement were also collected and analyzed to explore the relationship between student, faculty and institution sense-making. This study used a mixed-methods approach to bring forth a detailed account about the fluidity and complexity that characterizes the process of *becoming* college students; thereby, capturing the transition to college as a life activity of growth and development. Through the use of an activity-meaning system design and rigorous narrative analysis (Daiute, 2014), a variability of perspectives across participants and time was hypothesized. The theoretical and methodological foundation for this study posits that *becoming* a college student is a dynamic and relational process mediating adult development and that student expectations prior to college are related to their experiences in college.

Values analysis was used to identify expressed diverse meanings and sense-making about the transition to college as a developmental life activity. Values are the guiding principles that individuals enact in their lives and which shape the ways individuals make sense of and understand their world as well as how they fit into different situations and contexts (Daiute, 2014). Values analysis revealed that for first-time college students, becoming an adult on one's own terms, adopting a new work ethic, and becoming "somebody" are consistently important values over time, but in different ways. Becoming an adult on one's own terms was the most important value across all three genres, but it became less important across all genres after the first semester. In contrast, adopting a new work ethic became more important over time across all genres. Becoming "somebody" in the future grew in importance over time in the letter to self and defining a college student narratives, but was absent in the bio for website genre. Adopting a new label and embracing uncertainty, on the other hand, are unique values; their importance is tied to particular narrative genres. The institutional perspective (i.e., college faculty and mission

statement) emphasizes promoting diversity; faculty members' narratives and the college's mission statement are aligned in this respect. Although becoming an adult on one's own terms is also expressed by the institution, faculty responses and the college's mission statement center on different sub-values about what is important. Additionally, students' expectations about engaging in specific practices, such as making friends with people from different family backgrounds or using campus recreational facilities, were generally not related to their experiences; however, their overall expectations about connecting with new others and pursuing new experiences were positively related to their reported experiences. Nevertheless, students expected to partake in these activities more often than they did.

This study's mixed methods research design serves as a template for future studies aiming to capture the complexity of the transition to college as developmental phenomena and its dynamic interaction with broader social contexts. Moreover, this study moves beyond static representations of the transition to college by approaching this phenomenon as a life activity and pathway to adulthood marked by change and growth.