

Chapter Three

Making the Transition to College

Patrick T. Terenzini, *Pennsylvania State University*

Laura I. Rendón, *Arizona State University*

Susan B. Millar, *University of Wisconsin*

M. Lee Upcraft, *Pennsylvania State University*

Patricia L. Gregg, *Pennsylvania State University*

Romero Jalomo, Jr., *Arizona State University*

Kevin W. Allison, *Pennsylvania State University*

The research on college success clearly indicates that student experiences during the first year of college—both inside and outside the classroom—are crucial to their academic achievement, personal development, and retention (Upcraft and Gardner, 1989). Some experts would argue that the first semester, or even the first six weeks, are critical in determining whether students stay or leave (Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, 1985). Thus the transition to college marks a critical passage. If students don't survive this transition, a wide range of cognitive, psychosocial, occupational, and economic benefits may be lost.

In focusing on this transition, we must look at student experiences both *inside* and *outside* the classroom. Faculty and administrators have long assumed (not without reason) that experiences in the classroom contribute to student learning, and most of this

Note: The research reported in this chapter was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), under Grant No. R117G100037. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI, and no official endorsement should be inferred.

book is devoted to teaching and learning in formal instructional settings. Less evident, although perhaps just as powerful, are student experiences outside the classroom. Considerable research done in the past twenty years indicates that the quality, quantity, and type of students' out-of-class experiences can directly and indirectly influence cognitive development (such as critical-thinking skills and the ability to synthesize and analyze); psychosocial development; attitudes and values; moral development; and perhaps most importantly, in-class learning, academic achievement, and retention (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

This chapter describes and analyzes students' transition to college, both inside and outside the classroom, with special attention to the people and experiences that facilitate or impede this transition. We suggest ways to help make the transition to college easier and increase the likelihood that students will become more deeply involved in their education, learn more, and persist longer.

Importance of the First Year

Approximately one-third of each year's full-time entering students are not enrolled at the same institution one year later. This fact has not changed much in the last twenty years (Noel, Levitz, and Saluri, 1985). Similarly, research evidence consistently indicates that of all the entering baccalaureate degree students who will drop out over a five-year period, one-half will do so before the start of their second year. Why do so many students fail to make it to their second year? What can be done about this?

We start with four assumptions. First, some students leave for reasons that may be beyond institutional control, such as lack of finances, poor student-institution fit, changing academic or career goals, or unrelated personal circumstances. Second, many more students leave because the institution has failed to create an environment, inside or outside the classroom, conducive to their learning and educational needs. Third, institutions, through their

people and policies, can successfully intervene in ways that promote learning and simultaneously reduce attrition. Finally, and most critical to this chapter, these interventions must occur during the transition period, particularly in the first weeks and months of enrollment.

A research project conducted in 1990–1991 and sponsored by the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment sought to better understand what is really going on in the hearts and minds of first-year students that helps or hinders their success. The project attempted to identify ways that institutions could help.

Members of the research group interviewed first-year students at four very different institutions (all names are fictitious): Reallybig University (RBU), a large, eastern, public, research university; Urban State University (USU), a commuter-oriented, predominantly African American, comprehensive university in a major midwestern city; Bayfield College (BC), a small, private, liberal arts college in a Middle Atlantic state; and Southwest Community College (SCC; note that this is not to be confused with the Southwestern Community College in Iowa or the one in North Carolina), a two-year institution that is approximately one-third Hispanic, one-third African American, and one-fourth American Indian.

We spoke with 133 first-year students late in their first (or early in their second) semester and asked them several questions about their collegiate experiences to that point. The goal was to start with no assumptions and to listen as best we could to what students were saying about their transition to college.

We asked students what went into their decision to go to college and why they attended the institution they chose. We asked them what they expected in college and what they found. We asked what people were currently important in their lives. We asked about getting used to college life and what they would do to help new students make a successful transition to college. We

wanted to know what their most important experiences in college were and how they felt connected with the institution, if at all. We asked what, if anything, was significant about their being “different” by gender, race, ethnicity, or age. Finally, we asked whether or not they felt they had changed since entering college.

The transition from high school, work, or homemaking to college is an exceedingly complex phenomenon. The process is a highly interrelated, weblike series of interpersonal, academic, and organizational pushes and pulls that shape student learning (broadly conceived) and persistence in studies. Despite this sometimes bewildering complexity, two themes emerge from our interviews as common across all settings.

The first theme has to do with the place of “going to college” in the life of the student, both as a stage of life and in the value attached to college attendance. For many students (predominantly but not exclusively those who are white and recent high school graduates), college represented a continuation of conditions and processes established much earlier in their lives. For other students, going to college constituted a major disruption or disjunction in their “life’s passage.” For these students, college attendance carried with it considerable potential for stress and far-reaching change.

The second theme concerns the role of “validating” experiences in a student’s successful transition to college. By *validating* we mean those actions and outcomes that communicate to students (either directly or symbolically) that they have the capacity and competence to complete college successfully. Validated students had received encouragement or been formally or informally rewarded for achievement (however small the reward or achievement may have been). They were students whose demonstrated ability to perform had been recognized by someone important to them (teacher, parent, friend). This validation increased interest in continued participation and achievement in college. Self-doubt and anxiety over whether they could “make it” was progressively replaced by self-confidence and even joy in their accomplishments.

Our interviews made clear that these two themes are closely related. To illustrate, for students whose transition to college represents a disjunction in the life trajectory, validating experiences played an even more important role than they did in the lives of students for whom college represented essentially a continuation. Equally clear, however, is that few (if any) new students escaped discontinuous experiences entirely. Moreover, virtually all students appeared to find themselves in need of validating experiences of one sort or another. These two themes—continuation versus disjunction and the need for validation—appeared to be woven intricately throughout the academic and interpersonal lives of all the new students we interviewed. There is other evidence that student involvement in their educational experiences is directly tied to their academic and psychosocial development; the evidence clearly suggests that the way the transition is handled can have a direct bearing on the likelihood of subsequent change, development, and persistence (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

The Place of College in Life’s Passage

The place of college in the experience of a student varies, depending mostly on family circumstances. Much more is at risk if college is a new and unfamiliar experience than if the student comes from a college-attending family.

College as Continuation: Traditional Students

The educational portion of the American Dream is a story of uninterrupted study and progressively greater academic accomplishment, beginning in kindergarten and culminating in college, or graduate or professional school. For many Americans (primarily but not exclusively white), this passage is completed as expected. When asked what had gone into their decision to attend college at Really-big University and Bayfield College, virtually all those students were

surprised by the question, indicating that they had never considered not going to college. Two traditional-aged white students at Really-big University explained:

Going to college . . . was never even, like, a question! Um, both my parents went to college and I guess they figured that all their kids would go to college. I mean, . . . it was never even too much a question. Um, both my sister and I did pretty well in school and so college was just like the definite thing to follow high school.

The second student chimed in:

Yeah, I agree. Uh, going to college was never a, a question. You know, that's never something I thought about, whether I'm gonna go to college or not, that was kind of, a given.

These students (and many others like them) and their parents had assumed all along that going to college was simply the next logical step toward personal and occupational achievement. The notion originated in the educational attainment of parents, older siblings, or close relatives who at least attended, and frequently completed, college, and not infrequently some form of graduate or professional education (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). For most of these students, the very fact that they had been admitted to a moderately selective college or university was evidence that academically they "belonged" at their institution.

While these students occasionally expressed some concern about their ability to meet the academic competition, making new friends dominated their conversation. For them, the most threatening disjunction was interpersonal, not academic. A new student at Reallybig University described his experience:

I hated it. [Another student: "So did I. I cried. . . ."] Like, for the first couple of . . . I, I hated it, 'cause I was like, here I am in a situ-

ation where I know absolutely nobody. I mean, it's like, it's like you're just dropped in, it's like "Here you go!" And you know no one. You know, you had all these close friends and good friends, and you're always having a good time. . . . And I got here and I knew nobody. And it was just like, it was terrifying. And I think you have to learn it eventually, to actually, you know, break out into the world and do it. And know that everything will be OK and you will turn out fine, and you always meet these people, and like now, like when I first got here, I wanted to transfer. I was like, "That's it! Send me to a branch campus! I'll commute from home." [Other student: "Oh, God. . . ."] I was gonna commute, and then I was like, then I started thinking of it, like, "OK. It has to get better." And like, it's great. I love it now.

High school friends appeared to be instrumental in how successfully these new students made the transition to college. When a new student had high school friends who were also new students at the same institution, these precollege friends functioned during the early weeks or months of college as a bridge from one academic and interpersonal environment to the next. Older brothers, sisters, or friends already enrolled also helped the new students prepare for what they encountered during the transition. These individuals "had been there." They offered advice on how to deal with the institution's size, where important or useful offices are located, and so on, generally providing an unstructured, informal, but no less effective orientation for new students.

Old friends performed this bridge function, however, for a limited period of time. New students were limited initially to a friendship network linked to high school acquaintances, others living on the same residence hall floor, or other students enrolled in the same classes. These connections not only served as early interpersonal moorings, but they also provided access to other students as the new student's friendship network expanded and relationships developed with more and more new acquaintances. As this network of new

friends expanded, reliance on high school friends slowly faded in importance.

For some commuting students, however, the old friendship network may have constrained a student's interpersonal transition to college by anchoring them in their precollege social networks. One white commuter student at Bayfield College commented:

I think that, me being as a commuter, I expected that I would be, like, a lot more involved with things at school—like school activities, and I found out that I really wasn't interested in doing much at the school, you know, as far as, like, like clubs and whatnot. I'd rather, you know, associate with my friends from before college. . . . A lot of commuters I've talked to feel that same way. They go home from school and they [pause] and they're with their friends that they've had in high school. And they do the things they did in high school, and don't do . . . [Another commuter chimed in: "Oh, I, I agree with him, totally."]

There can be little doubt about the important role the families of traditional students played in encouraging students to attend college and to persist. With very few exceptions, when asked about the most important people in their lives right now students unhesitatingly named one or more members of their immediate family. While the sense of debt to parents for their support was more apparent among students at Southwest Community College and Urban State University, it was also evident at Bayfield College and Reallybig University. Among students at the latter two institutions, the comparatively muted response seems to reflect more their taking parental support for granted than that they enjoyed any less parental support than their commuting peers. The parents of traditional, especially resident, students seem to have functioned as a safety net during the transition. Parents were still a source of advice and counsel. They reinforced what the students already knew: that they could be successful and that the parents were there for them.

Compared to commuter students, residential students also appeared to be developing greater personal independence and autonomy from family and thereby to be redefining the nature of the relationship they had with parents. The new relationship, one of equality among adults, appeared to have replaced the hierarchical parent-child relationship that characterized their high school years when they lived at home.

Faculty and other institutional staff members at Reallybig University and Bayfield College appeared to play an extremely limited part in students' academic or interpersonal transition. When students at Reallybig were asked to name the most important people in their lives, parents and friends at the university dominated their responses. The only university staff mentioned were teaching assistants or residence hall staff, never faculty members. One young woman, hearing her peers talk about their large classes, commented: "One of my classes has two hundred in it [pauses, shaking her head], but the rest are big."

Such large classes virtually ensure that students will remain anonymous to faculty members. Few students believed any of their instructors knew their names or would recognize them if they passed on the street. Such anonymity, for some, was a positive attraction of large classes: students could sit back, "mellow out," and not have to worry about being called on in class. Indeed, some spoke of being able to skip classes entirely, read the text, get the class notes from a friend, and still make high marks on examinations.

By contrast, such comments were never heard from first-generation students at Urban State or Southwest Community College students. In fact, one SCC student who had transferred from a large state university talked openly about missing the large classes. In SCC's smaller classes, she "was afraid that maybe [the instructors] would catch me daydreaming so I paid attention more and learned more." She acknowledged that she could no longer hide in class, that she had to become involved in what was happening in class. She grudgingly allowed as how she was probably learning more at SCC.

College as Disjunction: First-Generation College Students

The adaptation to college was far more difficult for nontraditional, primarily first-generation, college students. Indeed, for many, going to college constituted a major *disjunction* in their life course. For these students, college going was not part of their family's tradition or expectations. On the contrary, those who were the first in their immediate family to attend college were *breaking*, not continuing, family tradition. For these students, college attendance often involved multiple transitions: academic, social, and cultural. A young American Indian student explained her motivation for attending Southwest Community College:

Right before [mother] died, she took me out to the reservation, and when we were outside the reservation, she pointed it out to me and said, "Do you want to be like this? Sitting around and doing nothing? Or do you want to go on?" So it was probably the reason why I went to college. Because they really have no life out there. She goes, she goes, "The majority," she told me that the majority of the Indians that, that don't, don't, that don't go to college or don't finish school just move back to the reservation and just sit there.

A young African American student at Urban State described being beaten up in high school by classmates who disapproved of his interest in ideas and his attention to his school work. Later in the interview, when asked what was special about USU, he replied without hesitation: "Well, like I said before. It's very open-minded here. . . . You can read in the hall or on the steps, and nobody will throw a brick at you."

A classmate described related reasons:

I have a lot of reasons, but I guess, basically, because of where I live, a lot of kids are killed, often, and, you know, I decided to further my education just to get away from it. I, I don't like the fact that people are, you know, constantly shooting at you. It, it's, uh, it's both-ersome. You don't want to be bothered with these gang bangers

gettin' you, rising up, so I said, "Either I make a difference or I get out of here." And I said "I'll do both. . . ."

Because of their family and educational backgrounds, for the first-generation students in our study the act of going to college often constituted a significant and intimidating cultural transition. Attending and completing college carried the potential for radical changes in these students and the lives they led. Indeed, for many the decision was a conscious choice to escape occupational dead-ends and hopelessness.

Many of these students found the academic transition the most challenging. When asked what they expected to find in college, most spoke of the anticipated academic rigors of college in comparison with high school. Most came expecting to have to study hard. Most found what they had expected, but others (a relatively small minority) commented that college was not all that much more difficult than high school had been. The majority, however, appeared to be deferring involvement in the nonacademic activities and life of the campus until they felt they had their academic feet under them.

But if the academic transition was of greater concern, making friends was commonly cited as being the key to "feeling connected" or "a part" of their institution. Several students spoke of looking forward to the time when they could devote more time to out-of-class activities and people. For a number of Southwest Community College students, the academic and interpersonal activities often overlapped, easing the transition in both spheres. These students spoke positively of meeting other students in their classes or on the patio at the student union, and of engaging in both social conversation and group discussion of what was going on in their classes. Several identified these sorts of sessions as among the most effective learning experiences they had (along with in-class discussion of course material). These reports are highly consistent with Tinto's (1987) finding that collaborative or cooperative learning approaches produce both social and academic links among students.

Like their traditional college student peers, first-generation students also cite their parents, a grandparent, or aunts and uncles as important people in their lives. In a few instances, students mentioned younger sisters and brothers as important people. In virtually all cases, these important individuals were mentioned for the support and encouragement they gave. For first-generation students, however, these important individuals often played an ambiguous role, sometimes supportive and encouraging, but also sometimes restraining.

For some students, particularly those from African American, Hispanic, or American Indian families, parents tried to maintain a relationship that they recognized might change. Some parents may have recognized that their college-going children—as proud of them as they were—would, metaphorically, never return home. Sensing such fears, the students of these parents found their anxiety levels rising in ways and to degrees unimagined by most middle-class white students, faculty members, and administrators. A Southwest Community College student describes this loving tension. Asked who the most important people in his life were, he replied:

My grandmother. Even though she is a big inspiration to me, uh, she has this way of clinging. She hates to let go of things. And I can understand. I think that's why she takes in a lot of us, as we're going along. She hates to let go. And my cousin and I have told her that we're going off, goin' to college. She goes, "I can't believe you're gonna leave." You know, "I need you here with me to do this or do that." "Listen, Grandma, life goes on. This may sound cold, but when you're gone, we're still here. And, uh, we need to do some things to prepare for our future." And she's startin' to understand that.

Friends also play a role in the level of success that first-generation students experience in making the transition to college. While high school friends at the same college may have performed the bridging role described earlier, this particular dynamic was less evi-

dent. Attending a commuter institution, as many first-generation students do, can dramatically alter the role high school friends play. As with the commuting students at Bayfield College, new students at Southwest Community College and Urban State often found that high school friends who did *not* go on to college complicated and hindered their transition. A new Urban State student described an encounter with an old high school friend:

Well, after we graduated, I seen him last week, matter of fact, and, um, he was just hanging on the mailbox, just, just, telling me, "What's up man? What you doin'?" And, you know, he seen the bookbag on my shoulder. "Aw, man! You goin' to school? Aw, man, that ain't nothin', man." You know, I just looked at him and hugged my shoulderbag, and left. You know, cause, um, see, he, he's not going to succeed in life. He's gonna be the one that's on the corner with the wine bottle, or he gonna end up dead. See, me, I'm gonna end up in school, you know, probably with a high-paying job, doin' what I like. [Another student's comment: "Or at least a job."]

A young woman at Southwest Community College experienced similar pressures:

My friend . . . plays basketball. But she, like, goes out partying and things like that. But she's after me. She [says]: "You're getting boring. You just stay home and study." I [say] "No, I'm going [to college]. . . . It's something I'm paying for. And . . . I wanna learn something. . . . I'm gonna be needing [it] . . . in the future."

As noted earlier, the nature of the transition for first-generation students, compared with that of traditional students, is more complex, more threatening, and consequently more stressful. Success in college will mean a major redirection of the life course. But if the benefits are greater, so are the risks and the fear of failure. For many of these students, the college years may not be "the best years," but

rather a deadly serious struggle. Ironically, even success in college for these students has its downside: as London (1989) notes, only when we begin to recognize that

mobility involves not just gain but loss—most of all the loss of a familiar past, including a past self—that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish that first-generation students [experience]. . . . Modernity creates the potential for biographical and social dislocation, so that freedom of choice, to whatever extent it exists, can also be the agony of choice (p. 168).

Validating Students

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky and others (1986) argue that “for women, confirmation and community are prerequisites rather than consequences of development” (p. 194). In their study, they found that “ordinary” women who were treated as stupid or incompetent and incapable of learning yearned for acceptance and validation. The needs of women students were in stark contrast to what was offered to them in college. Women wanted respect for their ideas and information about how to solve problems. Yet, they found that teachers who viewed themselves as experts or authorities usually tried to dominate the less knowledgeable, either by assaulting them with information or by withholding information.

Like our own research findings discussed above, this study helps us understand the potentially harmful effects the traditional model of teaching and learning may have on different kinds of students. In our study of students in two- and four-year colleges, for example, we learned that:

- While some students (especially those attending universities with stringent entrance requirements) felt comfortable with

their academic skills, others (particularly nontraditional students) came to college doubting their potential to succeed.

- Students of all kinds yearned for acceptance and validation. They articulated both a need to feel a part of the learning community and to know that they were capable of being successful college students.
- Both academic and interpersonal validation, like involvement, are critical to the successful transition to college.
- Academic *and* interpersonal validation appeared to be most important for many community-college, first-generation, and nontraditional students.
- Interpersonal validation appeared to be most important for traditional and nontraditional students attending larger, four-year campuses.
- Students who encountered invalidating experiences appeared to be less involved in their education and may have experienced learning setbacks.

Self-Doubt and Invalidation

When we asked students, “What did you expect and what did you find when you got here?” many nontraditional students talked about wanting their doubts about being capable of learning erased. Often they talked about wanting to be part of a community of learners, their desire to “start over,” and their personal expectations in regard to college life, course work, and career aspirations. These topics were especially common among community college students, women, Hispanic and African American students, and students who had been out of school for some time.

Some students expressed doubts about becoming successful college students. For example, an SCC student, explaining why she enrolled in a two-year college instead of a university, said:

Personally, I think I was unprepared for classes like English. I took my assessment test and I thought I was unprepared. I wasn't prepared in high school at all. . . . The way you do homework is different in high school. I couldn't have done it in a university.

One returning woman said:

I expected to fail. Two weeks and I was out. I didn't think I could study. I didn't think I could learn.

Some students described invalidating experiences at the hands of their instructors. An African American woman who held a General Education Degree (GED) and attended Southwest Community College described such an experience:

I went to secretarial school and I started working on Wall Street for an investment firm. I went in as a file clerk. . . . And within about two or three years, I was making my \$35,000–40,000 a year. . . . But when I came to [the campus] I was made to realize that I was a young black woman with hardly any education. . . . To come [here] and have someone speak to me as if I had the education of a five-year-old . . . that was a real bumner.

Other students talked about invalidating classroom experiences. Said one community college student:

My math teacher . . . he has a number [for me]. . . . I was a number, you know, instead of calling us by name, he would call us by our social security number. There aren't many people in class for him to go through all that and it's quicker for him to say my name than my number.

A Reallybig University student described an encounter in an elevator with one of her large-class instructors. When she com-

mented that she was in the instructor's class, he replied: "So what?"

Reallybig University students also commented on the chilly interpersonal and academic climate. Several students also felt frustrated about what they perceived as coldness from some faculty, classmates, and other students. They were disappointed, for example, when instructors would offer to meet with them after class but when approached later they were "busy," or they failed to show up during scheduled office hours. Students also complained that some staff could be very short-tempered with students. This chilly climate appeared to have less impact on the Reallybig students, however, because they expected it and felt they just needed to get used to a large university. One student reported:

When you come here and find that you're one of 800—that's my largest class—but there's no way the teacher can possibly know everybody, and I don't think he really knows anybody's name. . . . That's what we bargained for when we came to a big school.

The Role of Validation

With many students expressing the need to be validated and describing disappointment with invalidating experiences, we wondered how students might be transformed into powerful learners. Certainly, our study showed that those students who became involved in the social and academic fabric of the institution appeared to be more excited about learning. These were students who met with their instructors regularly and who were members of clubs and organizations. We even found students with enough initiative that they expressed little need to be validated by faculty or other students while adjusting to college. A man at Bayfield College exemplified this view:

My parents have always been very supportive. . . . So I don't think it was a big transition for me because I was already pretty independent.

I always tried to do things on my own. All through high school I never really asked my parents for anything; I always tried to do things for myself—I tried not to depend on my parents, because I knew one day I would be on my own, and my parents wouldn't be there for me. . . . I always tried to get involved in everything—like in high school I was very involved.

But not all students involved themselves in college so easily, particularly those who found the transition to college difficult and who were unaccustomed to active participation in academic and social structures. For these students, traditional institutional expectations and their needs were often mismatched. They needed faculty and staff to help them feel a part of the learning community and help them realize that they could and would be successful college students.

A remark made by an African American student at Southwest Community College exemplifies this point. When asked who had been most or least helpful in college, she said:

I find that . . . freshmen coming to college right out of high school . . . there's no sense of direction . . . when a student sits down and says, "Well, I'm not certain of what curriculum I want, what classes I need to be taking. How should I go about registration? How should I go about getting financial aid?" . . . I find that . . . people have to realize . . . that everyone is not aware.

An academic life is much different than that of life at home or in the business world. So sometimes terms are not familiar to you. People throw things at you right off the top of their heads . . . there's no time to explain. You feel out of place. You feel like one in a basket amongst many. And I find that this . . . is what discouraged me when I tried to enroll at a community college twelve years ago . . . I just felt lost, I was going crazy. . . . I felt like I was just lucky enough to be able to leave and not go back.

Academic Validation

Academic validation can take different forms. For example, students can be academically validated through the materials they produce as part of their coursework (getting good grades on tests, papers, examinations, and so on). At Reallybig University, students were validated both by being admitted to what is a moderately selective university and by receipt of good grades during their courses. It is noteworthy, however, that such forms of validation are delayed in that students rarely receive them until a semester is well underway. In some courses, students may receive such formal or product validation on only two occasions: midterm and final examinations.

In contrast to such product-based validation, students may also derive validation through the academic processes, the more subtle indications that others recognize their academic competence (for example, positive oral feedback from instructors and peers in class, being asked for help by another student, casual compliments on their academic knowledge and skills). Academic experiences like these helped students trust their innate capacity to learn and gave them confidence. For example, students reported that they acquired positive attitudes about their academic ability in classes where faculty demonstrated a genuine interest in teaching, were personable and approachable, treated students with respect, structured learning experiences that allowed students to experience themselves as capable of learning, created a caring classroom environment, and provided frequent and meaningful feedback to students. Students at Southwest Community College and Urban State University expressed the greatest need for academic validation.

A returning woman at Southwest, for example, described a transforming experience:

I was amazed at . . . what I had preconceived that college would be like. I did not believe that the instructors would be so personable with each individual and want to teach you—want to teach you. I

thought it was like what I've heard [the large local university] is like, where you go out there and they don't care whether you come in or out or whatever, you're just a number, and they don't care whether you learn or not, it's up to you to learn. And here people are helping us to get our minds in order to where we can learn. It's a process. It's like a nurturing process.

The kinds of academic experiences in which faculty had students participate served as important mechanisms for validation. A female student at Southwest Community College illustrated by explaining that her most important experience was viewing a videotape of a presentation she had made in front of her classmates:

I don't know quite how to say this, but when you hear yourself talk . . . and you observe this individual that has blossomed into something that I hadn't even been aware. . . . I would sit in awe and say, "That's me! Look at me!" I like me.

Likewise, a Southwest Community College student, an African American student who had not passed his previous college English classes, explained his validating experience with his English teacher:

Most teachers, they consider my failings. They just come to school because they have to get paid. [My English teacher] came to school to teach you. Plus if you had hard times she understood. It was like if you couldn't come to class one day, the only thing you had to do was call her. . . . If something was wrong, she could tell you how she felt. That's what teachers need to do more. Some treat you like you're a statue.

Faculty were not the only people who provided validating, in-class experiences. A young Urban State student recounted the support a classmate gave him:

Recently I got a C on a test in zoology where I was an A student there. And I was [feeling like] "Give up!" You know, I cried a little bit. I was ticked off. But then I had someone constantly behind me saying, "You're going to do this. Sit down and study, and you can do it! Don't worry about it."

In the absence of in-class validating experiences, some students were able to turn for validation to people outside of class. A traditional-aged Urban State student provided an example of this support:

The single most important person in my life right now is my mother. She's the type of person that does any and everything for her two children. She has sacrificed. She feels that my education and my well-being, as well as my brother's, is the utmost importance. And with that type of parenting, or that type of support, even if you do not finish your goals, you will know that it wasn't because you didn't have any support.

Interpersonal Validation

Validating actions of an interpersonal, as opposed to academic, nature appeared to foster personal adjustment and social integration. Students who expressed the greatest need for interpersonal validation were those who had changed (or wanted to change) their sense of self, needed a sense of belonging, had doubts about their ability to make friends in college, or were attending Reallybig University and felt overwhelmed by the large number of students. Friends and other students played particularly important roles in interpersonal validation.

When asked who were the most important people in her life, a student at Reallybig responded:

There are seven or eight of us who are friends on the floor [and] who are always [hanging] around [together]. We know that if one of us

has a problem everyone is going to be there to deal with whatever needs to be dealt with. It's your friends at school who you're going to depend on most.

A twenty-six-year-old African American woman at Bayfield noted that "The [younger] girls of color, for some reason, I don't know, they seem to look up to me. They admire me, which makes me feel good."

Several students also recounted the important role parents played as validating agents. One man at RBU commented:

When you are in high school, you think, "My parents are a nuisance, they kind of just bother me or they leave me alone." Then you don't realize until you're gone what they did for you and how much they are involved.

Toward a Definition of Validation

The "validation" we heard woven through students' discussions of their transition to college differs from the "involvement" described by Astin (1985), Pace (1984), and others (for example, Study Group, 1984). *Involvement* typically describes the level of student effort in the educational process and implies that students have a responsibility to participate actively in that process. *Validation* refers to actions taken by persons *other* than the student. What had transformed these students were incidents where something was done for them or in conjunction with them—when someone else took the initiative to lend a helping hand, to do something that affirmed their capabilities and that supported their academic endeavors and social adjustment. Thus validation appears to have the following dimensions:

- It is an empowering, confirming, and supportive process, initiated by validating agents, that helps move students toward

academic and interpersonal development and can ultimately lead to self-empowerment. Thus validation and involvement appear to be at least precursors, perhaps even prerequisites, for student development.

- Validation is a developmental process, not an end. The more students are validated, the richer the academic and interpersonal experience can be.
- Validation is most effective when offered early in the student's college experience, immediately after the student arrives on campus. Validation should continue throughout the college years.
- Validation can occur both in and out of class. In-class validating agents include faculty, classmates, lab instructors, and teaching assistants. Out-of-class validating agents can be significant others (spouse, boyfriend or girlfriend), family members (parents, siblings, relatives, children), friends (classmates and friends attending or not attending college), or college staff (faculty who meet with students out of class, counselors, advisors, coaches, tutors, teaching assistants, or resident advisors).

It is important to keep in mind that holding students accountable for involving themselves with the social and academic infrastructures of an institution is likely to work only for students who possess the skills to gain access to these opportunities or have experience in utilizing these means. The students who get involved on their own are likely to be those who have *already* been validated.

Many students, particularly nontraditional and first-generation students, expect to find the campus climate rather alienating and intimidating. Perhaps the most important implication of our findings is that students who get no validation in class appear to rely on out-of-class validation to carry them through. The compensatory relationship between high levels of academic integration and low levels of social integration, and vice versa, has been observed

in other students and shown to be related to retention (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). In the absence of both in-class and out-of-class validation, however, it is reasonable to expect the student to become disillusioned with college.

To move students toward full academic and interpersonal development, it is necessary to recognize that not only must the students adapt to the system, but the institutional staff, especially faculty, must help students adjust and help their institution become more accommodating to the needs, interests, and learning styles of different kinds of students. Faculty and staff must go beyond expecting students to get involved. Merely being available will not be enough. Faculty and staff must take the initiative. Somebody has to care.

Conclusion

The implications of these dimensions (and variations in them) of the transition process are nontrivial for all students, but especially for nontraditional students. We conclude with some recommendations, suggested by our research and that of others, of ways faculty members and academic administrators might ease students' transitions to college.

Implications for Faculty Members

Faculty members often hold the key to successful experiences for students. These suggestions will help to ensure that early instructional experiences are positive.

Avoid Student Stereotypes. Think about what you consider to be the "typical" college student at your college. The chances are good that in thinking "typically" you may be overlooking a substantial number of the students on your campus. Such reflection is particularly important for faculty and administrators whose backgrounds

and college experiences resemble those of "traditional" students: entered a four-year college at eighteen directly from high school; from middle-class, white parents who also went to college; lived on campus. On some campuses (for example, the University of California at Berkeley), such students now constitute a minority of the student body. Faculty and staff must carefully consider the dramatically different character of the transition process for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. These students often must reconcile competing demands relating to work, family, their peer group, culture, and school. Very few traditional students will ever confront all five sets of demands simultaneously. Increased awareness of, and sensitivity to, what is happening in nontraditional students' lives is needed, as are policies and programs that recognize and respond to these differences. Our current instructional practices, academic regulations and policies, office hour schedules, and expectations of students all bespeak a view of students that admits few differences among them.

Look for Opportunities to Humanize the Relationships You Have with Students. College faculty and staff are among the most crucial validating agents. Their contact with students in and out of class has a wide range of important, documented influences on student learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Exemplary and validating faculty are those who are willing to work one-on-one with students in need of assistance; who give out their home telephone numbers; who design learning activities so that students can see themselves as capable learners; who provide meaningful, immediate, and consistent feedback; and who are personable and approachable. Such activities send subtle but important symbolic messages that students are valued by the faculty member and the institution.

Structure Courses So That Students Become Active, Involved Learners. This suggestion can take a variety of forms. It could include various approaches to individualized instruction (such

as Personalized Systems of Instruction, the Keller Plan, audio-tutorial classes, computer-assisted instruction, programmed instruction). It could provide for peer teaching and tutoring, create group assignments, and encourage study groups. It could give students an opportunity to help design the course and learning activities. It could use various collaborative learning activities (see Goodsell, Maher, and Tinto, 1992), and frequent, detailed, and constructive feedback on oral and written work (don't wait until midterm exams to let students know how they're doing).

Look for ways to psychologically "downsize" large classes. For example, in a large religion class, Harvey Cox, an internationally known religion professor at Harvard, used teaching assistants as mentors to discussion-group members, each of whom took responsibility for leading the small-group discussion of a week's readings and lectures (Light, 1990).

Treat Students as You Would Want to Be Treated, or as You Would Want Your Child to Be Treated. As straightforward as this might seem, we heard numerous stories about faculty members with short tempers, who failed to keep posted office hours, who spoke down to students, who denigrated students' classroom contributions, who wouldn't take the time to learn students' names, and so on.

But this suggestion goes beyond common courtesy. Be sensitive to the needs of your students, particularly nontraditional students. Many of them may be among the most highly motivated individuals in your classes. (One student we interviewed worked two full-time jobs and was successfully carrying twelve credit-hours of courses; he slept three or four hours per night.) Be available to students outside of class. Treat students equally. In your classes with fewer than thirty students, learn their names and something about each person by the third class session.

With Colleagues, Review Departmental Regulations, Practices, Policies, and Attitudes That Might Interfere with Student Learning. How is it decided who teaches the lower-division intro-

ductory course? Are these assignments viewed as paying one's dues or as an opportunity to make students' first exposure to the discipline exciting and memorable? How well do the rules and regulations accommodate students who may be unable to study full-time, or who cannot proceed in an orderly march of 12–15 hours per semester toward the degree? Do department members keep their office hours? Do students and faculty ever interact socially (departmental clubs, picnics, intramural athletic teams)? Do faculty advisers ever invite advisees to their homes for dinner? A growing body of evidence indicates that the interpersonal climate within a department is more closely related to student learning than are discipline-based differences among departments (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

Get Involved in Your Institution's Student-Orientation Programs. Student-orientation programs serve an important early socialization function. During orientation, new students are first introduced to the attitudinal and behavioral norms of a new academic setting as well as its expectations of them. It is important that new students make contact with faculty members as early as possible in their college careers. If orientation is little more than an early course registration and an introduction to Old Siwash or college survival skills or the services that are available for various kinds of problems, then an important opportunity to help new students make connections with the academic and intellectual life of the institution will have been lost.

Discourage Thinking About this Sort of Activity as Coddling Students. Too many faculty members and administrators believe that faculty contributions to the education of undergraduate students begin and end with the classroom, laboratory, or office and are properly limited to dealing with class-related questions or with academic advising. Some faculty members consider informal, out-of-class contact with students as coddling, or (worse) irrelevant or inappropriate to the role of a faculty member. Such views are at the heart of

much that is currently being criticized in undergraduate education in America. Bear in mind that students may spend up to 85 percent of their waking hours outside of class. Extending the faculty's influence on student learning means having students and faculty be more involved with one another in educationally desirable ways outside the classroom. This kind of treatment of students is not coddling. It is sound educational practice. Don't weed out; rake in.

Implications for Academic Administrators

Administrators provide crucial leadership. These recommendations describe roles and actions that set high standards for students, faculty, and other student support providers.

Help Students Find an Academic and Interpersonal Niche in the Institution. Because friends from high school appear to play an important role in the transition to college, where feasible institutions might help new students identify and locate already enrolled students from their high school or community. Where such matching is impossible because of institutional size, peer counselors and "big brother/sister" programs can be instrumental in helping new students during the orientation and transition period. New students at Bayfield College, for example, noted the helpfulness of that school's "POSSEs" (Peers Offering Support Services for Education).

During the Orientation Period, Give Attention to the Emotions New Students Are Experiencing. One theme common to our interviews, regardless of the students involved or the location or type of their institution, was that the transition process generates feelings. Some students feel excitement, exuberance, and exhilaration with their new adventure. Others, however, feel anxiety, stress, apprehension, even fear. These latter emotions can be both powerful and educationally dysfunctional. Ways must be found to

ease or productively direct this tension and anxiety. Students might be advised that most of them are experiencing these emotions and that they should not be surprised when they begin to feel this way.

Orient Parents and Spouses, as Well as Students. The evidence strongly indicates that parents and spouses play a key role in the support of new students adjusting to a new environment. Such support is needed most by first-generation students, whose parents or spouses may be least able to provide it because they have not been through the transition experience themselves. Parents or spouses of all students should be helped to understand the nature of the academic demands that will be placed on the students, and how to deal with the stresses parents or spouses and students will be experiencing.

Review Faculty Promotion and Tenure Criteria, Policies, and Practices. Faculty members are keenly aware of what kinds of activities and behaviors are rewarded at their institutions. While many faculty members are committed to teaching undergraduate students, many are not. Those who are not are unlikely to spend much time in activities that are not rewarded in some fashion or other. If the education of undergraduate students is an important part of an institution's mission, then a redefinition of the faculty role and a restructuring of the faculty reward system, particularly at large universities, may be needed to restore undergraduate education to a position of prominence.

Review Faculty Recruiting and Hiring Criteria, Policies, and Practices. Care should be taken in hiring new faculty members. Important messages about what is and is not valued by an institution are given to candidates for faculty positions. Are candidates asked to make a presentation to undergraduate students, as well as to current faculty members and graduate students? Is evidence of teaching competence required as part of a candidate's dossier, and

72 Teaching on Solid Ground

taken as seriously as evidence of scholarly competence and productivity?

Assign the Department's Best Teachers to the Introductory Courses Most Likely to Be Taken by New Students. This suggestion is likely to benefit not only new students but also the department. It is in the introductory courses that future majors and graduate students are recruited. A student whose first exposure to a discipline is a negative one is unlikely to pursue that discipline further. Too much is at stake for the job to be left to amateurs or drones.

Review Course-placement Processes and Criteria. Success in the early weeks and months of a semester appears to be important in students' continued interest, involvement, and persistence in the academic setting. How seriously taken is the task of finding the best match between new students' interests and abilities and the courses they are required to take?

No doubt there are other steps that faculty members and administrators can take to ease new students' transition to college. In some respects, the matter boils down to individual and institutional will to contribute to student learning. In the successful transition experiences that students described to us, success hung on whether someone inside or outside the college cared enough to put students and their education ahead of other things.

References

- Astin, A. W. (1985). *Achieving educational excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goodsell, A., Maher, M., & Tinto, V. (1992). *Collaborative learning in higher education: A sourcebook*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment.

- Light, R. J. (1990). *The Harvard assessment seminars: Explorations with students and faculty about teaching, learning, and student life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Graduate School of Education and Kennedy School of Government.
- London, H. (1989). Breaking away: A study of first-generation college students and their families. *American Journal of Education*, 144-170.
- Noel, L., Levitz, R., & Saluri, D. (Eds.). (1985). *Increasing student retention: Effective programs and practices for reducing the dropout rate*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pace, C. R. (1984). *Measuring the quality of college student experiences*. Los Angeles: University of California at Los Angeles, Graduate School of Education, Higher Education Research Institute.
- Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). *How college affects students: Findings and insights from 20 years of research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education. (1984). *Involvement in learning: Realizing the potential of American higher education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Institute of Education.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Upcraft, M. L., & Gardner, J. N. (Eds.). (1989). *The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.