The Social Readiness of First- and Second-Year College Students: Variables Supporting Success

Mary Jane Secuban
University of Arkansas

Abstract

College students, as members of the higher education community, learn to rely on their institution - both institutional peers and institutionalized offices - for the supports necessary to matriculate. These experiences, including the readiness of the student, are a direct reflection on the extent that institutions are communities that have learned from multiple generations of students. Using multiple focus groups, the current study explored and sought consensus about how college students matched their expectations and reality of collegiate life, and how they learned to navigate their collegiate experience.

For many high school students, the transition to college was a major rite of passage to adulthood (Astin, 1977; Boyer, 1987). Students were faced with a number of challenges and opportunities in the college environment that began to shape their development. Understanding the undergraduate students’ college experience has been examined largely in terms of a student’s academic preparation (Bowman, 2010; Jamelske, 2009; Kahn & Nauta, 2001; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Noble, Flynn, Lee, & Hilton, 2007; Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001). However, there are few studies that explored the impact of socialization factors to college (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Mattanah, Ayers, Brand, Brooks, Quimby, & McNary, 2010; Weidman, 1989).

Socialization to college provided critical insight into the study of college students. In a study by Pike (2006), socialization emerged as an unexpected result of student personality types, choice of academic major, and expectations about college. Weidman (1989) argued that researchers should focus on the socialization of students in college.

The purpose for conducting this study was to develop an understanding of undergraduate college students’ social readiness for the collegiate experience. Specifically, the study explored the role that socialization plays in a student’s transition from high school to college. By doing so, the study offered valuable insight into understanding students’ college experiences from a sociological perspective in order to aid in developing retention initiatives for undergraduate students in the critical first and second years of college.

By developing an understanding of undergraduate college students’ social readiness for the collegiate experience, the current study had particular significance to a number of constituents. A number of influences existed that continually act on and around the student. These influences included parents, community members, high school administrators, college faculty, student affairs professionals, state and federal policy makers as well as the college environment itself. The impact of the study had implications for policy and decision-making that affected how high school administrators prepared students for college as well as how college administrators and faculty assisted students in their transition to the college environment.
administrators within academic departments were impacted by the results of the study because they had a better understanding of the role social preparedness plays in a students’ success inside the classroom. Additionally, parents of college students as well as community members were more knowledgeable in terms of the type of support their students need in this important transition. Finally, state and federal policy makers were more informed as to the best practices for student success and created laws and policy to reflect those best practices. Even though each influence surrounded the student, the college environment tied all of the groups together in a symbiotic relationship. Having a better understanding of how the college environment influenced the student can give us insight into how a student’s background characteristics and experience played a role in his or her eventual success.

Through exploring college students’ perceptions and expectations regarding their university experience, higher education researchers and policy makers finally have the keys to how to provide the types of support and connections that undergraduates need to be successful in college. By doing so, students should be more successful inside as well as outside the classroom.

Background of the Study

Out of the more than 2.5 million public high school graduates in the United States, 70% will go on to pursue a college education (Kirst & Bracco, 2004; Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Today’s students understand the need to attend college (Kirst & Bracco, 2004), but many students find the experience so challenging that they do not complete their first year or even return for their second year of college (Kirst & Venezia, 2004; Lipka, 2006). Research from the U.S. Department of Education “has shown that among all students who drop out of college, about two-thirds as many do so in their second year as in their first year” (as cited in Lipka, 2006, p.2). One reason for students not returning may lie in research conducted by Schneider and Stevenson (1999). The authors concluded that most high school students have misaligned ambitions, meaning that they have high ambitions but no clear plan on how to achieve those goals. Similarly, Mortenson (1998) (as cited in Kirst & Venezia, 2004) reported that for the majority of students

the key to graduating is returning after their freshman year, to continue their studies at the college in which they first enrolled. Students who do not continue on to the second year, whatever the reason, will have a more difficult time completing a degree (p. 11).

Successfully graduating students from college not only improved a student’s career possibilities, but also contributed to a healthy democracy. The United States previously led the world in the educational attainment of its youth, but recent statistics have shown that the United States is now behind other countries (Engle & Lynch, 2009). To address the issue, President Obama set a goal for the US to return to its number one position by 2020 by “increasing both college-going and college-completion rates” (Engle & Lynch, 2009, p.2). A number of studies have emphasized the need to address the success of students through academic preparation (e.g. grades and graduation rates) in order to improve the retention, persistence and graduation of students from institutions of higher education (Baker, & Siryk, 1984; Pascarella, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Yazediarian, Purswell, Sevin, & Toews, 2007). However, recent studies have shown the importance of addressing how nonacademic factors contributed to student success in college (Berk & Goebel, 1987; Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Kuh, 1999; Kuh, Gonyea, &
Williams, 2005; Lacy, 1978; Pascarella, 2006; Pike, 2006; Reason, 2009; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008; Thompson & Joshua-Shearer, 2002). Further, additional research needed to focus on the transition of students from high school to college, especially in the area of socialization (Swenson, Nordstrom, & Hiester, 2008; Pike, 2006; Renn & Arnold, 2003).

**Role of Cultural Norms on College Campuses**

College is [also] about what goes on outside the classroom, among the students with no adults around. College is about being on your own, about autonomy, about freedom from the authority of adults, however benign in their intentions. And last but far from least, college is about fun, about unique forms of peer-group fun before, in student conceptions, the grayer actualities of adult life in the real world begin to close in on you. (Moffatt, 1991, p. 46)

Campus life in America today is a culture unto itself. Within the microcosm of the communities within colleges and universities existed a culture with its own rules and regulations. When new members are introduced to the environment, cultural norms were introduced in a variety of ways: formal and informal interactions. Formal interactions included new student orientation programs and classroom time with faculty. Informal interactions involved the development of relationships within the student’s peer group, whether that be through student activities or athletic activities (Hartshorne, 1943; Kuh, 1995; Moffatt, 1991; Tinto, 1987, 1993; Weidman, 1989). Hartshorne (1943) described the college community as another version of a social community called a social system. This social system included “the informal ‘unofficial culture’ of the students, developed by them in their process of adjusting to the official culture” (p. 321). The other two components of the social system included the training and selection of the personnel on the campus and the “formal organization and material equipment of the college, which may be called its ‘official culture’” (p. 321). Moffatt (1991) wrote about students’ development in an “informal college learning” context that he termed “life experiences” (p. 59). These life experiences were meant to prepare the students for adulthood in the real world as the students think of it: learning to take responsibility for their own actions in a big institution where nobody monitors them closely. . . . . and learning from their successes and failures in college life-from what they sometimes call ‘social learning’ (p. 59).

Similarly, qualitative research conducted by Christie and Dinham (1991) identified significant patterns influencing students’ social integration into college. These patterns included “experiences both within the social environment of the college (institutional experiences) and external to the social context of the institution (external experiences)” (p. 418). Significant institutional experiences stood out: living on campus in the residence halls and involvement in campus activities. Noteworthy external experiences were the students’ interactions with their high school friends and family (p. 422). In that study, external experiences were salient factors influencing students’ daily lives, leading the researchers to suggest the importance of pairing external influences with institutional influences when examining factors of social integration and persistence.
The critical role that campus culture played in the student experience was further validated in a study by Strauss and Volkwein (2004). The researchers investigated predictors of student institutional commitment at 51 campuses nationwide. The study concluded that the strongest influence on institutional commitment came from the students’ own campus experience. Investigators found that students’ academic and social experience had five times more significant an influence on a students’ overall commitment to the institution than any other variables in the study (including financial aid variables and precollege characteristics of age, gender and ethnicity). Policy implications for higher education administrators included improving the classroom experience through active engagement, addressing advising issues, making faculty more available to students, and facilitating the development of friendships among students through campus and community activities (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Thomas, 2000). By doing so, students found their bond to the institution strengthened through the development of social networks, further increased the rates of persistence and graduation from the institution.

Yazedjian, Toews, and Sevin (2008) conducted a student success study to explore how students defined success in college. Of the multiple themes investigated, students cited “a sense of connection to the university and to others” as being important factors to success in college (p. 146). Similar to the research by Moffatt (1991) students in the study shared the “importance of finding a balance between having an active social life while also maintaining reasonable grades” (p. 146), indicating that success in college involved a variety of academic and social factors. Additionally, the researchers found that students in their study wanted to be able to navigate the college environment on their own as another component of feeling successful in college (Yazedjian, Purswell, Sevin, & Toews, 2007).

In a study by Clark (2005), students in her study “perceived social integration as the most prominent challenge in their transitions to college” (p. 297). Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, and Cribbie (2007) wrote that “in the transition to university, students’ academic, social, and emotional adjustment are perhaps the three most important domains to consider” (p. 260). The researchers found that the effects of social support, self-esteem and stress to be major factors in the adjustment of students to college. Higher education can address this issue by facilitating opportunities for peer involvement for students. As a result, students began to develop their own strategies for successfully transitioning to and through college (Clark, 2005; Friedlander, et. al., 2007; Keup, 2007; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2004; Yazedjian, et. al. 2008).

Research Methods

Participants and Procedures

The study used a qualitative approach using a narrative research design. As described in Creswell (2008), Connelly and Clandinin (1990) described narrative research design as a way to “describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people’s lives and write narratives of individual experiences” (p. 512) The method of data collection involved focus group sessions utilizing semi-structured, open-ended research questions that the researcher recorded via audiotape and a typed transcription of the sessions. The researcher also journaled immediately following each of the focus group sessions as a reflective exercise to identify themes that occurred throughout the session. The study was guided by the following research questions:
1. What were the perceptions of undergraduate college students regarding how they felt their background characteristics and precollege experiences influenced the social aspects of their collegiate experience?
   A. From first-year student perspective
   B. From second-year student perspective

2. How did students’ expectations of college social life inform the students’ choices, actions and social integration during their first year and second year?

3. How did students negotiate the social transition to their first and second year of college?

Since the researcher was the only data collector for the study, reflective journaling was done in order to triangulate the data collected with the transcripts and demographic data provided by each student. Because the study sought to explore the individual experiences of first and second year students, focus group sessions were the ideal method of data collection to obtain information on how students are socialized to college. Focus groups were useful in this type of data collection because “focus groups are widely respected for bringing out information that might be missed by a statistical study” and “are useful for learning what participants think in addition to why they think as they do” (Quible, 1998, p. 34). Newton (2000) conducted interviews with millennial students and stated

I tapped into one of the richest sources of information—students’ own stories. Students are excited to talk about their life and very willing to participate in focus groups and seminar discussion . . . . They are also curious about their peers . . (Newton, 2000, p. 9).

Additionally, focus groups were a more effective means of data collection for this particular study versus one-on-one student interviews because of a number of reasons. First, the researcher relied on staff at multiple campuses to find students. Because of this issue, staff could easily gather a group of first- and second-year students for the focus groups versus searching and scheduling individual student interviews. Secondly, one-on-one interviews “are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably” (Creswell, 2008, p. 226). Because this population of students is limited to traditional-aged first and second year undergraduate students, a group setting such as a focus group was a more conducive method for data collection because a group setting encourages interaction among the interviewees. (Creswell, 2008). The interviews were conducted at four sites across the southern and Midwest United States during the Fall of 2010. The time frame was selected to capture first- and second-year students’ perceptions and expectations of their college experience.

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the first and second year students who participated in the study. These statistics were intended to provide a general context and background of the students who participated in the study. However, because the study was limited to a small sample of institutions and student populations, the statistics were not intended to generalize to the broader population of college students.

The survey instrument involved specific open-ended questions intended to obtain the students’ experiences from high school to college specifically related to their social and academic
expectations during semi-structured focus group interviews. The students were asked the following questions:

1. What kinds of experiences have you had that prepared you for college life?
2. How did these experiences shape your current college experience? Are they different or the same as what you expected college to be like?
3. What kinds of things do you do to make sure you stay in college?
4. In what ways did your parents, friends or others support you when you first arrived at the university? (for sophomores) In your second year?
5. In your opinion, what could they have done differently?
6. What is the hardest thing you’ve had to deal with in college?
7. What did you do to successfully (or not) transition to your first year of college? Your second year of college?
8. Do you know where to go for help on campus when you need something?

Participants in the study also completed a short questionnaire that was used to collect demographic and background information to be used following each interview. Permission for the study was approved through the University of Arkansas Human Subjects Review Board.

Findings

A total of seven focus group sessions were conducted at four sites across the southern and Midwest United States during October and November 2010. The time frame was selected to capture first- and second-year students’ perceptions and expectations of their college experience. First- and second-year students from different institutional types, specifically a community college, private college, a comprehensive state university and a public research institution, were included as part of the study. These institutions were classified in the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching as being: one private two-year not-for-profit associates granting institution; one private not-for-profit 4 year or above, baccalaureate colleges with diverse fields; one public 4 year or above comprehensive doctoral granting with very high research activity; and one public 4 year or above postbaccalaureate comprehensive master’s colleges and universities.

The current study was designed to develop an understanding of undergraduate college students’ social readiness for the collegiate experience. Specifically, the study examined the impact of social readiness factors in the transition of undergraduate students from high school to college. The findings included parents, siblings, friends and teachers having a significant influence over the students’ perceptions of their college experience. Similarly, students in the study found that participation in extracurricular activities in high school helped in their transition to college. However, for first-year students in the study, forming close friendships in their first year of college was difficult and often marked with disintegrating relationships with roommates. Sophomores in the study found themselves more comfortable in their college surroundings as well as having a solid base of friends. No matter the classification of students in the study or institution type, a connection to family and friends were important in the transition to college. Additionally, setting goals and achieving a balance between academic and social activities were important factors in the students’ adjustment to college.
Students in the current study expressed a surprisingly deep understanding of the impact that the collegiate experience has had on them on an emotional, social, spiritual, and academic level. Many of the students described the varied experiences in college as having an “impacting” influence on their lives and consistently mentioning that no matter how prepared they felt they were for college, experiencing it for themselves was extremely important. Also, the influence of parents and family were significant factors as students moved through college and students often found a changing dynamic in their relationship with their parents. Mostly, the role of their parent moving from more of a caregiver role to more of a mentor role and for many of the students, this had a positive effect on their experience.

For research question one, both first and second year students that participated in the study agreed that a number of background characteristics and precollege experiences influenced the social aspects of their collegiate experience. A number of precollege experiences, that included everything from summer programs, study abroad programs to concurrent enrollment in college classes to AP and honors courses, were cited as important experiences that prepared these students for their current college experience. For many of the students in the study, a blend between academic and extracurricular activities was important to having a balanced understanding of college life while still in high school.

The people in their lives had the biggest influence on the students’ experiences and expectations for college. Having family members that had previously attended college (whether that be parents and/or siblings) were significant influences on the students’ college experience and expectations. For other students, having supportive teachers, counselors, non-related adult figures, professors, and church members was critical to their collegiate experience. For example, Susan had a mother who had not been as supportive of her in high school or college. She commented

And so I have somebody else who is in my life who is like my mother who has filled that mother-figure but if my mother was more supportive of my decisions and what I want to do. Like showed that she cared more.

For all the students in the study, parental pressure seemed to resonate the loudest. There was a common desire to ensure that, no matter what, parental expectations weighed heavily in the students’ decision-making process while in college. Susan explained

I have raised myself since I was 12 so I’m pretty independent. In college, there’s a lot of things you could fall into, like drugs, you could fall into drinking, not going to class. Like there’s a lot of bad decisions you could make and being independent and having raised myself and having known for myself what is best, I’m not going to fall into any negative activity.

For research question two, students in the study quickly realized during their first semester of college that their extracurricular involvement and academic performance in high school played a significant role in their transition to college life. For Joy, serving as a peer educator during her senior year of high school allowed her to educate younger teens about the risks of teen
pregnancy. In this role, she participated in many workshops that allowed her to practice her oral presentation skills. In her words

\[\ldots\] that really made me more confident and helped me to be able to speak in front of people.\ldots And in the end prepared me for college because it boosted my confidence and I felt a lot better about myself \ldots then being involved with clubs and volunteer activities \ldots really helped to mature me and get me ready for college.

For many of the sophomores in the study, having a year to adjust to college made a huge difference in their social integration during their second year of college. At this point, these students had an established group of friends and no longer had the same first-year student pressures of having to recreate friendships. At the same time, these students were familiar with their respective campuses and had a better idea of the resources that were available to them versus their first year. Many students mentioned academic learning centers, where they received assistance in writing papers, foreign language tutoring, or math homework. All of the students mentioned the importance of visiting their professors during office hours, before or after class. Other students talked about the professional resources available on campus for counseling or health-related concerns. The students collectively agreed that getting help is available everywhere and in Peggy’s words, “it really just depends on what you’re looking for.” Still other students mentioned specific staff members and their residence assistants (RAs) as invaluable resources in their college experience. Susan attended a small comprehensive institution and said “you can always talk to your RA.”

The study found that for research question four, students negotiated the social transition to their first and second year of college in a mixture of ways. For first-year students, maintaining a balance between their academic and extracurricular activities was important. However, having a connection to family and friends was equally important in their transition. Students maintained contact with family through web-based video conferencing, text messaging and telephone calls. Parents often visited their student, sent care packages or helped them with their classes. First-year students also found that interpersonal relationships were difficult to form during their first semester of college and often relied on close friendships formed in high school. Once students got involved in campus activities, their network of friendships widened and deepened, so much that many of them developed core friendships by the end of their first semester of college. Additionally, first-year students found connections with university faculty and staff through first-year experience programs and frequently relied on these relationships to get them through difficult times in their first semester. Becky reflected on the support she received from her first-year experience instructor and her academic advisor,

I found it really helpful to go to \([my\ \textit{first-year\ experience\ instructor}]\). She’s got a big couch in her room and I just go sit there and talk to her about my problems. Like last week, I got the first ticket of my life and I was in there bawling, trying to figure out what to do. Talking about how I didn’t want to tell my parents because they weren’t exactly happy about me being out on my own at 17. So you know, then I’d get a lecture on how responsibility is something you just need to take upon yourself. But when I had a problem with the registrar’s office, she called over there for me and you know she talked to one of her friends over there and got it figured out. So I mean it’s always really good to
make a connection with a professor or an instructor and you know they can always help you out. Like my academic advisor is also one of my professors so anytime after class if I need anything, I just walk over to his office and he’ll fix it for me.

Second-year students negotiated the social transition to college by setting realistic goals, joining student organizations and staying true to their personal beliefs. Some of the sophomores relied on the international experience they received while in high school. By doing so, they felt a renewed confidence and appreciation for diversity and meeting new people. Experience abroad also allowed them to have independence from their parents that translated into a smoother transition to college life.

Overall, the sophomores in the study realized the social transition involved a time of self-discovery. The students realized they were growing into adult roles that meant making their own decisions and for many of them, that was an empowering feeling. Other students found that pressure from parents continued to motivate them to succeed academically.

No matter how the students negotiated the transition, there was definitely growth emotionally and socially from the first to second year of college for the students in the current study. Coming in as insecure first-year students, the sophomores were confident and established in their goals and what they wanted to accomplish during their second year. It was clear that without the support of family, friends, faculty and staff, the social transition for these students would have been much more difficult.

**Discussion**

For both first and second year students in the current study, achieving a balance between extracurricular and academic activities while still in high school was critical to their understanding and eventual adjustment to life on a college campus. Furthermore, the researcher concluded that the effect of parents and other significant people had the biggest influence on the students’ expectations and experiences about college. These individuals provided emotional, financial and social support for students in the current study. However, parental pressure resonated the loudest and weighed heavily on the students’ decision-making process during their first and second years of college.

Whether the expectations were to have a firm relationship with roommates, faculty, or other students, the students in the current study utilized all the pre- and newly established relationships as sources of support during their first and second years of college. By doing so, the students were able to make decisions that were in their best interest and firmly cemented their role as a college student within their new environment.

Students negotiated the social transition to their first and second year of college in a variety of ways. For first-year students, maintaining a balance between their academic and extracurricular activities was important. Having a connection to family, friends as well as faculty and staff on campus was equally important in their transition. First-year students also found that interpersonal relationships were difficult to form during their first semester of college and often relied on close friendships formed in high school. However, once students got involved in
campus activities, their network of friendships widened and deepened, so much that many of
them developed core friendships by the end of their first semester of college.

Internal and external influences shaped the students’ adjustment to the collegiate environment in
a number of ways. Experiencing campus culture, religion, roommate issues and parental
influences were keys to how students adjusted to college in their first year. Navigating positive
and negative roommate issues as well as relationships with the opposite sex were all issues
involving interpersonal relationships that students in the study experienced. The students also
found that having the support of parents and college administrators were key to their adjustment.
Internal motivation for both first and second year students included having a natural love of
learning to learning self-discipline. The sophomores in the study found that adjusting to college
involved having a positive social network and adequate financial support. This adjustment
included balancing the expectations of college being a big party as well as developing
themselves as adults and finding themselves responsible for their success (or failure).

The results of the current study supported the need for continued research on the relationship of
nonacademic factors such as parental and peer support, precollege characteristics and
involvement in student activities on campus contributed to students’ socialization to college. By
examining these factors in concert with academic factors, college administrators should be able
to develop more effective interventions that could improve retention and graduation rates. A
study by Larose, Robertson, Roy, and Legault (1998) supported the need to examine how
nonintellectual factors can be used as predictors of college success. Specifically, “their capacity
to adapt to their new college environment, their personal motivation and involvement regarding
learning, and their relationships with their peers and faculty members” (p. 278) was key in
understanding how college students succeed from a social readiness standpoint.

The current study also supported the role of cultural norms on college campuses. The students in
the current study were introduced to the college campus through their informal and formal
interactions with their peer groups as well as with faculty, staff and student organizations. Other
studies such as Christie and Dinham (1991) identified the patterns that existed influencing
students’ social integration to college. The current study supported the influence of both external
influences such as parents and high school friends having an effect on the students in the study as
well as institutional influences such as living on campus and involvement in student activities
having an influence on the students in the current study.

Understanding the experiences of undergraduate college students from a social readiness
perspective was key to developing effective retention and transition programs to help these
students succeed. In the current study, a number of social readiness factors were identified that
played a role in the students’ perceptions of their college experience. Factors such as
extracurricular activities in high school, Advanced Placement and concurrent enrollment classes
as well as the influence of parents and family were all significant influences on students’
expectations of college. Additionally, developing a strong social network in college that involved
trust and friendship was essential to many of the students in the current study. In summary, by
having a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the students’ collegiate experience
based on their expectations and experiences, administrators and faculty alike will be able to

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better develop policy and initiatives that will contribute to students’ eventual success, satisfaction, and graduation from our institutions.

References


