

The Summer Reconsidered: Actively Transitioning Freshman into Collegiate Life

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Introduction

Do summer transition programs help students adjust academically and socially to their new institution? Based on the work and results of the Summer Experience program, the answer is yes. The Summer Experience program was a six week semester aimed at helping newly admitted freshman successfully begin their collegiate careers. This article explores the work of the Summer Experience planning team from the conceptualization of program goals to the analysis of student learning outcomes. This paper will also explore how the Summer Experience framework aligns with concepts found in *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2*. Additionally the authors provide reflection based on preliminary results from the overall program assessment.

Summer Experience Program

Planning a transition program is an endeavor that needs thoughtful, intentional planning, and should be based on well developed goals and learning outcomes. Given the importance of intentional academic and social support needed for freshman students, it is necessary to provide an environment that is equipped to handle student needs. From the suggestions of *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2*, the Department of Housing intentionally collaborated with several campus departments over the span of 5 years to develop a summer transition program for freshman students.

Beginning the summer of 2006 the institution permitted freshman students to begin their college experiences during the summer semester. The increase in freshman attendance over the summer led to The Department of Housing having to play a new role in providing services to freshman students. This meant staff would have to learn how to replicate services traditionally offered in the fall semester.

After careful review of two summers the experience freshman students had in summer housing yielded mixed results. According to informal feedback provided by Hall Directors and student staff members, the services offered in the summer were not fully helping freshman transition into their fall semester. Students did not seem to have a realistic picture of the academic expectations of the institution. Based on comparative data, students did not do as well academically as their other counterparts who began in the fall. In addition, students did not feel connected to their residence hall community; therefore students spent time away from campus and the residence halls. According to the Director of the Freshman Experience these were valid reasons to develop goals and learning outcomes for a summer program.

During the 2007-2008 academic year the Department of Housing wanted to take a more intentional approach and reorganized its summer semester housing into a learning outcome based transition program. A planning team was formed that consisted of four professional staff members from the department, the Coordinator for Academic Support Services, a Hall Director, and two Area Coordinators. The team worked for one academic year on creating learning outcomes and goals for what would be called the Summer Experience program.

The Summer Experience program was designed to address the transitional needs of freshman to the institution. With a goal of approximately 200 student participants, the program was designed to bridge the academic and social transition issues students faced once they began their collegiate experience.

The goals of the program include the following:

1. To promote academic success in the residence halls
2. To provide program participants with an accurate picture of what they will experience both academically and socially during the fall semester and beyond.

3. To provide opportunities for residents to interact with faculty.
4. To create a supportive and successful community amongst residents and staff.
5. To create opportunities for leadership development and learning through service.

Based on the five goals, the program was divided into four components, Academic Support, Leadership Development, Staffing, and Faculty Interaction. Each component was designed to address one or more learning outcomes of the program. Here is an in-depth look into the researched literature that supported the Summer Experience goals.

Literature Review

The literature will focus on five major areas that shaped the development of the Summer Experience program. The sections include *Learning Reconsidered* texts, support and adjustment to college, student engagement, impact of community service, and partnerships between academic and student affairs. This literature review is a synopsis of the information considered to develop a meaningful transition program at the institution.

Learning Reconsidered

Using the concepts and framework provided in *Learning Reconsidered* and *Learning Reconsidered 2*, the Summer Experience program was developed to enhance student learning within student living. In June 2004, *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* was written as an “introduction to new ways of understanding and supporting learning and development as intertwined, inseparable elements of the student experience” (The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & The American College Personnel Association, 2004, p. 1). *Learning Reconsidered* emphasized the role of student affairs in supporting the broader campus curriculum. In addition, *Learning Reconsidered* was written to

build upon early documents that expressed the commitment of student affairs in educating the whole student. Further the text states, “it presents the current and future praxis of student affairs and affirms the commitments of student affairs and affirms the commitments of student affairs to educating the whole student” (p. 1).

The goal of *Learning Reconsidered* was to provide educators with a new understanding of student learning that incorporated academic learning and student development. *Learning Reconsidered* defines learning “as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development, processes that have often been considered separate and even independent of each other” (The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & The American College Personnel Association, 2004, p. 2). In addition, the author’s outlined seven learning outcomes that can be used as a foundation for developing opportunities on campus for students. The learning outcomes included cognitive complexity, knowledge acquisition, humanitarianism, civic engagement, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, practical competence, and persistence and academic achievement. For this project the focus was on civic engagement, practical competence, and persistence and academic achievement learning outcomes.

These specific learning outcomes were chosen because of their opportunities to develop a student. Because of the time frame and the limited resources, it seemed fitting to focus on three learning outcomes for the summer semester. Specifically, civic engagement was chosen because of its opportunity for one to engage in community activities ranging from service to community council meetings. This benefits students because it increases awareness of community and global issues as well as develops leadership skills. The second learning outcome, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence, was selected because of its focus on knowing self and others. This is

particularly important for freshman students as they prepare to embark on a major life change such as college. The learning outcome practical competence was selected for the same reason because of its focus on communication, the ability to manage personal affairs, and wellness. Finally, the learning outcome of persistence and academic achievement was selected due to its focus on teaching students about academic and personal success. These learning outcomes would provide the initial framework for how to develop the summer program.

With the framework of *Learning Reconsidered* identified for the project, the supplemental text, *Learning Reconsidered 2: Implementing a Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience* would serve as a guide for the practitioners as they created an intentional program. The text details the importance of student learning outcomes, how to develop student learning outcomes, and how one would assess learning outcomes. Also, *Learning Reconsidered 2* provides concrete examples and a step by step guide to developing intentional, learning outcome driven programs. This practical guide gave a lens into possibilities of designing the Summer Experience program. It also helped the committee to narrow the important part aspects of the program.

Support and Adjustment to College

Transitioning from high school to college is a major change for most students (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). Because of this, the importance of providing support to a newly admitted college student is key in their adjustment to college. As noted by Friedlander et al. (2007) “in the transition to university, students’ academic, social, and emotional adjustment are perhaps the three most important domains to consider” (p. 260). With this in mind, mechanisms for support are important to the success of a college student.

Studies have also concluded that the first year of college can be more stressful than

anticipated by the student (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986; Daughtry & Kunkel, 1993). Depending on the university, up to 60% of first year students leave without finishing and most of them do so within their first two years (Porter, 1990). Also, most students note that their most common health factor that has an impact from their academics is stress (American College Health Association, 2006).

Research studies have discussed the importance of social support for students (Tao et al., 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Social support is defined as “resources that individuals perceive to be available or that are actually offered to them by helping relationships” (Friedlander et al, 2007, p. 260). Researchers used student definitions of perceived social support as a means to understand how social support is generally understood by students. As defined in Friedlander et al., (2007) “perceived social support is a person’s perception of the availability of support from others and captures the complex nature of social support including both the history of the relationship with the individual who provided the supportive behavior and the environmental context” (p. 261).

Studies have also concluded that it is important that students maintain contact with their peer group in order to successfully adjust to the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Also, Friedlander et al. (2007) finds that research implications support the work of residence life staff by providing conducive study environments and programs to help manage stress and adjustment issues for first year students. Having this information also supports the need for well developed social supports for students. Various programs play a vital role in creating an environment where students can interact with each other and build a sense of community. We know that ample staffing is also important in helping to facilitate those relationships between peers. Structures are needed to help provide a safe, welcoming environment for students.

Student Engagement

Research has concluded that student engagement is the single most important factor which aids in the learning, development, and persistence of college students (Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) find that “the impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus...” (p. 602). Pascarella & Terenzini (2005) continue “It appears individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college” (p.602). Several opportunities within higher education contribute to student engagement. These practices include intentional student-faculty interaction and collaboration between academic and student affairs units. It is the role of student affairs practitioners to help in the facilitation of student engagement opportunities for its students. Below, the authors will explore two specific ways in fostering student engagement: community service and academic and student affairs partnerships.

Community Service

Community service serves as an opportunity for student engagement. Research has outlined the benefits of participating in community service to include educational, vocational, and social interactions (Cruce & Moore, 2007). For example, the educational gain of someone who participates in community service promotes better grades and increases the critical thinking skills of college students (Cruce & Moore, 2007). In addition, vocational gains include increased likelihood that one will participate in community service again, seek a service oriented profession, and will seek opportunities to attain an advanced degree. The social gains include the development of leadership skills, a commitment to diversity including social issues and a better sense of self. Service can also help students feel as though they are a part of a larger community

such as a university or city. This is particularly important to note as one includes students in the engagement process of their collegiate experience during their freshman year. This supports the notion of not only the importance of providing opportunities for engagement but the use of community service projects as a means of fostering engagement.

Academic and Student Affairs Partnerships

One of the major critiques of the four year institution is its fragmented organizational structure (Boyer, 1985; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). A goal of student affairs units has been to work collaboratively with academic affairs in institutions of higher education in order to deal with the challenge of fragmented campus resources. This has been challenging given several factors which include diverse student demographics, rapidly changing technology, and fewer resources (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004). Terenzini and Pascarella (1994) state that this fragmentation has a negative impact on student learning, therefore, it is important that partnerships between academic and student affairs exist in order to create a seamless learning environment. As defined by Kuh (1996) “seamless learning environments are characterized by coherent educational purposes, comprehensive policies and practices consistent with students’ needs and abilities, and a widely shared “ethos of learning” (p. 136). Therefore, it is a priority to create a seamless learning environment for students. Students should not only see the benefits of the services offered through community service initiatives, but they should know how academic affairs work in tandem with the other areas to support their educational endeavors.

Summer Experience Components and Learning Outcomes

Component 1: Academic Support

The purpose of the Summer Experience program was to help incoming freshman learn about campus culture. For the summer 2008 program, staff would have to begin the process of helping freshman learn the academic rigor of collegiate study. The Summer Experience planning team started with the component, academic support, to highlight the fundamentals of academic services. Based on what the planning team knew about freshman adjustment and support issues, the learning outcomes included the following: students should learn how to manage a schedule and set time aside for studying and completing homework; have opportunities to learn about effective study groups; learn strategies for transitioning to the fall semester; and learn campus academic resources. The outcomes were approached in three ways. First, the planning team devised a seminar series that would mimic the semester long freshman seminar course, which is traditionally offered in the fall and spring. This series invited various academicians to lecture on topics such as study skills, successful transition to fall semester, classroom etiquette, ways to make the deans list, and successful stress management.

Second, the Summer Experience program would designate and utilize a space specifically for academics, called the Learning Center (LC) located on the ground level of its main residence hall. The LC catered to the residents tutoring needs, study endeavors, and acted as the staff's academic programming space. In addition to the services offered in the center, incentive programs for frequent users and visitors were devised to promote studying together. Students who frequented the LC were awarded book vouchers and free study manuals for their personal use.

Third, the summer experience planning team added an innovative way to reinforce academics within the residence halls. The planning team introduced and added the role of a new student staff position called the Peer Academic Leader, aptly titled the PAL. PALs were added to

entreat residents into placing academics at the top of their priority list by supporting and enhancing the academic culture of the community. They were student staff who focused solely on connecting academic life with residence life, and would work sedulously to host academic programs that promoted this connection. Their job responsibilities included one on one meetings with the department's academic coordinator, hosting a weekly academic program, and living among the residents they served. In this capacity PALs acted as role models for academic achievement and role modeled a balance between school work and student life.

The three sub-components, seminars, the learning center, and the Peer Academic Leaders, made up the programs larger academic support component. Each sub component enforced a message that the residence hall would serve dually, as a social hub for students who lived together and also an extension of the classroom with academic support spaces, in area seminars, and student leaders called PAL's.

Component 2: Staffing

As momentum for the Summer Experience program grew, it became equally important to the planning team that having an engaged student staff was vital. In other words, the Summer Experience program would only be successful if all of its major objectives and goals were supported by the student staff in the program. If the student staff assisted in creating an action plan as to how the program would meet its goals, they in turn, would feel an investment in helping and working with freshman. Their energy and endurance to pull off a semester's worth of specialized attention in just six weeks was needed for the programs success.

It was also important to have a small staff to student ratio because student staff could better develop relationships and provide more individualized support for each student. Having a ratio of 1 student staff member to every eighteen residents represented a ratio that would

promote this specialized attention. More specifically, specialized attention was in the form of a program called check-ups. Check ups happened every two weeks. During these check-ups student staff met with each of their residents with a garner of questions about homesickness, transition to college life, alcohol choices, and academics. The responses to such questions would allow the staff to determine what types of programs or personal interventions may have been necessary for any given student.

The student staff also pre-planned programs and set up calendars on each floor so residents knew exactly what was coming. Because student staff members were paired with each other it was easier to get different floors together to do programs. This helped each resident become every staff member's resident. As far as campus events, the summer months proved less hectic than the fall semester; therefore freshman looked toward the residence halls for all their social needs. Because the student staff team did not have to compete for time with other campus and college activities, residents attended programs in large numbers and paid closer attention to scheduled events within the hall. This not only made program planning and execution easier, but also helped keep the student staff motivated to continue creating better programs, more frequently. The learning outcomes designed for student and staff interactions were: (a) to feel a part of a community; and (b) make connections with students that would continue into the fall semester and beyond.

Component 3: Leadership Development

Another fundamental part of the Summer Experience program was bridging the gap between the Department of Housing and the Office of Community Service. The two units relied

on each other, as the Summer Experience team negotiated a leadership component that not only involved exposing eighteen student staff members to service projects through the larger residence life training, but by also developing an intentional service learning program to be implemented for the residents within the halls. The learning outcome for this component supported development and leadership, students would hone in on these skills through participating in community service projects. Partnering with the Office of Community Service, the initiative sought projects that would support post reflection and dialogue among the volunteering participants. The eighteen student staff members were paired in groups of two and then partnered with a specific community organization. Over the six week summer semester, the service projects varied, but all correlated with the idea that service learning promoted civic responsibility and leadership skills; two ideas which *Learning Reconsidered* highlights as vital to supporting humanitarianism and civic engagement. These projects included preparing meals for the elderly, playing board games with cancer patients, working as servers within a homeless shelter, and delivering meals to physically disabled adults.

Several themes emerged from the community service evaluations. One theme surrounded the idea that service learning promoted a dialogue among residents about social responsibility. The hall director noted in a post-Summer Experience meeting with the planning team, “staff members reported in their one on one meeting’s that residents conversed after service projects, asking questions like: How often should one perform community service? What Greek organizations participate in community service? Can we go again?” In addition, the hall director commented, “One staff member said she witnessed a group of students debating what communities needed help from volunteers and which ones did not.” Many students said they felt they accomplished something to help others, which made them feel good and want to continue

helping. This feedback illuminated a second theme, which involved the concepts of a transformed consciousness and higher learning. Kolb (1984) defined learning as the process where by knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences (Kolb, 1984). Most, if not all the students of the summer experience were familiar with the term community service, but as these students actually participated in service they began to understand how the act of doing can change the act of knowing.

Component 4: Faculty Interaction

The Summer Experience team also factored in faculty involvement to assist with the student's transition. The academic seminar series was twofold, it acted not only as a sub component for academic support but it also encouraged faculty interaction within the halls. The learning outcome was to meet faculty and learn strategies for success in core university classes and learn university culture. Faculty were encouraged to participate in community service programs and assisted with devising the themes for the seminar series. Seeing faculty in the halls provided campus cohesiveness for the residents, they began to understand the college space as more a collaborative effort of academicians working together, rather than seeing residence and student life as two distinct sites. In addition, to working collaboratively with faculty, the residence life professional staff partnered with the Athletic Association. The Athletic Association provided speakers for the seminar series that were helpful to reaching the goals of the program. This collaboration with the Athletic Association was imperative because an entire floor was dedicated to newly arrived student athletes.

Results

By the end of the summer semester, not only did staff have lots to say, so did the summer freshman residents. Each resident was given a closing survey to complete as they checked out of

their residence hall assignment. While staff assessed the conditions of the room the residents completed the survey. In the end 112 surveys were collected; this represented 62% of the population. Questions were constructed to gain general feedback about the quality of the services while other questions were written to assess learning outcomes for the program.

General findings suggested students had a positive experience in the residence halls. Specifically, students agreed that basic services such as check-in, campus transportation, and building appearance met their expectations. Also, students agreed or strongly agreed that the campus and residence hall felt safe and that the duty response system was easy to use.

Professional staff gained feedback about specific components of the program through four or five question surveys. For example, one seminar was about proper classroom etiquette. When students were surveyed about the seminar most agreed or strongly agreed with learning the following information: using office hours, timeliness to class, and using a syllabus. Most also agreed or strongly agreed that the information presented gave them a better understanding of classroom etiquette. In addition, students commented on learning about the importance of showing respect to their faculty members. Based on these results, it is assumed that students did meet the learning outcome of learning strategies for success in core university classes as well as learning the culture of the university.

Another seminar was conducted on time and stress management skills. Overall, the students either agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better understanding of time and stress management after attending the session. Most students also agreed or strongly agreed that they learned information about prioritizing, procrastination, and alleviating stress. On average, students agreed that they would recommend this session for the future. Similar findings were calculated for the academic planning seminar. Students agreed that they learned the importance

of planning and being prepared for classes. Overall, students left with a better understanding of academic planning. After reviewing the data, it seems the information supported the following learning outcomes: students learned how to manage a schedule and set time aside for studying. Overall, the majority of the students who participated and completed the survey found the seminar series helpful.

Additional questions were asked about students' perceptions of academic support. Students felt the Department of Housing provided the appropriate support to help them excel academically. The respondents also agreed that they were academically prepared for the fall semester. These results support the learning outcome that students will learn strategies for transitioning to fall. Also, a question to measure whether or not students knew about campus academic resources yielded results that most students agreed that they learned about academic support.

Overall, the data collected for this pilot program seems promising. However, the assessment continues at the end of the fall 2008 semester, a focus group has been asked to convene to discuss the intentionality of the program, as well as, an assessment of the grades of non-participant and participant grades will be examined. This information will be crucial in identifying the trends and long term affects of the program.

Conclusion

As described in *Learning Reconsidered and Learning Reconsidered 2*, collaboration is important in helping to create an environment that promotes student learning (Keeling 2006; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association 2004). The Summer Experience team successfully piloted the program during the first year. Overall, the experience engaged 180 freshman residents including student athletes in a

program that helped them transition into the institution. The Summer Experience program proved to be a valid attempt in collaborating with other department's on campus including Academic Affairs, Success programs, and the Athletic Association in order to enhance student learning with the residence hall. The planning team believes several of the learning outcomes for the program were met, as noted further examination of the successes of the program will continue now that the first cohort of participants has matriculated through fall semester.

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