

First Year Transition into Higher Education: One Student's Experiences*

[*Center note:* Supports for transitions is one of the major arenas of school activity our Center addresses. As we pursue the topic, we try to look at what is happening on our own campus and especially as it is experienced by students. As part of her work with our Center, UCLA student Shannon Mooney looked into transitions to college and wrote up her personal experiences. Below hear the voice of a student.]

When it comes to transition to college, researchers emphasize the responsibilities of both the individual and the institution. At my university, a variety of transition and first year programs help new students make a successful transition from high school or community college (see *New Student and Transition Programs* -- <http://www.newstudents.ucla.edu/>; First Year Experience -- <http://firstyearexperience.ucla.edu/>). What follows is a report on my transition experiences, as well as my work as a New Student Advisor.

My Experience as a Student

As a graduating high school student, my biggest concern when I chose a college was finding one that would fit me. This was a concern in terms of my capabilities, as I didn't want to end up at a school where I could not compete academically. However, I also considered my motivation. I had always had very strong intrinsic motivation, and it was crucial to my success in school. I wanted a school with students who had the same mentality, and the school climate would nurture students' natural motivation to learn.

Program Supports

When I arrived at the campus, I found several programs in place to cater to first year students. One was called the *Cluster Program* (<http://www.uei.ucla.edu/clusters.htm>). This consists of a set of year-long courses exclusively for first-year students. Distinguished faculty teach a topic from several different disciplines. Because the class goes the full year with the same faculty and first-year students, it has the familiarity of a high school class without sacrificing college-level rigor. Courses are offered on everything from the evolution of the cosmos to health in Latin America. The final quarter of this year-long series is a range of seminars focusing on specific topics. Students pick the one that most interests them. This provides an opportunity to study one topic in-depth in a small class environment. The length of this program enables a gradual transition into college. Personally, it allowed me to gain comfort with my professors and learn how to form relationships with them even in large class settings. The course also challenged my thinking by encouraging me to critically look at an issue from the perspective of different disciplines. This was good preparation for success in my other classes.

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Another program of choice that helped in similar ways was called the *Fiat Lux* (<http://www.uei.ucla.edu/fiatlux.htm>). These classes are one unit and cannot be taken for a letter grade, thus removing academic pressure. Enrollment is limited to no more than twenty students. The focus is on a specific faculty member's special interest (often unique, sometimes obscure). For instance, I took classes on topics "Gender in Sport" and "Surviving the End of the World". The discussion-based sessions made me much more comfortable voicing my opinion in class, and the professors' eagerness for student involvement helped alleviate my concerns about professors being aloof and unapproachable. Having this type of contact with professors in my first year was of incalculable value.

Personal Supports

On a personal level, perhaps the biggest key to my happiness during the transition was the strong support systems available to me. First and foremost was continuous family support. I called my parents about every other day when I first came to school, then gradually less. The school's *Parent and Family Programs* puts a great deal of information online about how to support students away at school and provides links to ways to stay involved in campus and articles regarding topics like health and wellness and finances (<http://parents.ucla.edu/>). All of this information helped my parents stay connected in my life from hundreds of miles away. Additionally, about six weeks into my time at college was *Parent and Family Weekend*. Parents have the opportunity to attend programs such as the Chancellor's welcome and lunch with the dean, as well as the homecoming football game. The timing of this program was very beneficial for me, as I had now really begun my adjustment at school, and I was excited to show my family how I had gotten settled since I had last seen them at move-in. The program allowed me to have a reason to keep my parents in my college life, making it easier for them to see what support I still needed and respond accordingly.

My eagerness to form other support systems led to getting involved quickly in all welcome activities (<http://www.truebruinwelcome.ucla.edu/>). The *Enormous Activities Fair* allowed me to become familiar with organizations on campus and meet students who were very involved, or, like me, intended to be. I also attended the free welcome concert (*Bruin Bash*) which allowed me to relieve the stress that came with my transition to college and have a topic to discuss with other students I was meeting. Finally, along with all new students, I attended *Volunteer Day*, which gave us all a chance to bond while helping others and making positive changes in the local community. The social connections made during these activities certainly eased my transition.

My Subsequent Experiences as a New Student Advisor

When I later became a New Student Advisor, it provided a different lens to see how the university assisted with transition to a higher education institution. I encountered students who had a variety of transition needs and concerns. I also had exposure to new student programs that I had not taken advantage of and so learned about all the programs in place to support students in their initial transition and continuing throughout their first year.

Support Begins Shortly After Acceptance

An early transition step occurs in April, after acceptance letters are received but before students need to submit their Statement of Intent to Register. Students and their families are invited to attend special day on campus (*Bruin Day* -- <http://bruinday.ucla.edu/>). After a welcome by the Chancellor, they have the opportunity to explore booths clarifying the many campus offices and resources (e.g., Financial Aid, Scholarship Resource Center, Student Employment, and Housing).

After they submit their Statement of Intent to register, new students are put in contact with current students through a phone calling project. New Student Advisors call to remind them of approaching deadlines (housing, financial aid, honors program, College Summer Institute, etc). The personal contact also gives a new student the opportunity to ask questions before arriving on campus for orientation.

Summer Institute

Students can attend the College Summer Institute, an optional 6 week program for incoming freshmen (<http://www.newstudents.ucla.edu/csi.htm>). Attendees take two classes, typically an English Composition course and one course that satisfies formal preparation for the student's major. Students live together in the same building, allowing relationship building. The program includes extra-curricular activities (a welcome BBQ, optional bonding trips to the beach, museums, plays, and other activities both on and off campus). While the institute is overseen by the New Student and Transition Programs Office, students coordinate the program, and this provides immediate and personalized student-to-student contact as a transition aid.

New Student Orientations

Perhaps the most extensive program to aid new students' transition is *New Student Orientation* (<http://www.newstudents.ucla.edu/>). The three-day program includes academic advising, workshops on school services, and class enrollment. New Student Advisors are an integral part of this. They help campus advisors familiarize the students with the increased rigor of the quarter system. For example, advisors discourage students from taking an exceptionally heavy course load, and new students are forbidden from petitioning for excess units. Many students resist this, as they are used to taking six or more classes in high school. Having a peer as an advisor tends to make the students more willing to listen.

Students are also often concerned about being lost among the crowd at a large institution and eager to get involved. In addition to being a peer contact, New Student Advisors are trained to answer general questions about on-campus clubs, organizations, and student service programs. Students also can attend an *Activities Fair* at orientation and meet with others involved in these organizations to obtain a first-hand account.

Family Orientation

New families have their own orientation (<http://www.newstudents.ucla.edu/familyo.htm>). It helps parents learn what is expected of students so they can be an active support system during the transition and after. Information includes a short campus tour and general overviews on enrollment and move-in, and a faculty presenter explains academic expectations.

Welcome Week and First Year Experience Activities

Welcome Week events and programs include a range of activities designed to both ease transition and acclimatize newcomers. A major example is the *Common Book* every new student is recommended to read (<http://firstyearexperience.ucla.edu/>). A new Common Book is chosen every year and is typically reflective of a social issue that would give students perspective on their goals and beliefs heading into college. Every student is given a copy at orientation. In dorms, the book is then discussed with the floor as well as the Resident Assistant. The objective is to build a common experience and have students share and understand differing viewpoints, give them a taste of the diversity of experiences and opinions they will encounter on campus and in life, explore their role in society, and build a community of intellectual learners.

Beginning in Welcome Week and continuing throughout the first year is a series of fifteen workshops (the *Freshman 15 Program* -- <http://firstyearexperience.ucla.edu/workshops>). These are intended to teach academic necessities such as writing skills and to discuss social issues

facing the campus. The workshops are designed for small groups and are intended to be a safe place where students feel comfortable sharing their opinions. They also provide ongoing supports into the first year.

A next steps program also provides additional counseling and peer supports over the year (*Bruin Next Steps* -- <http://www.newstudents.ucla.edu/transitionprograms.htm>). Advisors offer academic advice (course planning, choosing a major) as well as general help transitioning into students' second year.

Students may also attend *Orientation Part 2* for continuing academic support. They can meet with New Student Advisors in fall quarter and receive academic advising and general advice about heading into the next quarter. There also is information and advising about majors and post-graduate schooling and the process of enrollment.

New Student Mentoring

Attempts to help students adjust go beyond just academic supports (e.g., through the *Student Mentoring Network* -- <http://www.newstudents.ucla.edu/transitionprograms.htm>). At orientation, students can sign up to have an advanced New Student Advisor assigned as their mentor going into fall quarter. As advanced New Student Advisors, mentors have been trained about academic requirements as well as student service programs – everything from libraries to Greek Life to where to print on campus. This enables students to have an ongoing, informed point of contact to answer both academic and non-academic questions. This program can provide new students with a trusted resource to look up to and can help to create networks and relationships.

Acknowledging and Rewarding Program Participation

Finally, a new program has been introduced that focuses on validating newcomer participation in campus traditions, including transition programs (see *True Bruin Tradition Keeper* -- <http://newstudents.ucla.edu/traditions.html>). Students are rewarded with a medal at graduation for their participation in the many campus traditions (e.g., taking a Fiat Lux course, attending games, etc. etc.).

Recommended Strategies for New Students

Based on research and my experiences, I recommend the following as ways for a student to make a successful transition into an institution of higher education:

- >In preparing for higher education, the transition can be easier if the student takes AP classes or community college courses in high school.
- >Family and high school staff should develop an individual plan that addresses major transition concerns. It is especially critical to learn what to expect in order to anticipate and address problems and ways to ease into the situation (e.g., visiting, attending orientations, participating in a college summer program, avoiding an initially heavy course load).
- >If feasible, initiate contact with a counselor at the college for information and guidance.
- >Work out matters related to finances before leaving for college to minimize stress (e.g., delineate a realistic budget with a consideration for unexpected contingencies).
- >Prepare to deal with daily and periodic stressors (e.g., learn problem solving and stress-management techniques) and how to access counseling and other campus resources. (Class enrollment, mid-terms, and finals are particularly high-stress times.)

- >Build and maintain, a social support network and adapt it to fit as personal changes occur.
 - >Celebrate successes (even in times of stress small celebrations can help counter anxiety and maintain progress).
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Center Note About Enhancing Institutional Efforts

In addition to the above strategies, a special focus is needed on increasing student participation in transition programs and retaining students. The Center for Mental Health in Schools has addressed these matters in several works (see reference list). The Center's analyses point to barriers that interfere with equity of opportunity and the failure to address such barriers.

The Center stresses that:

- At all levels of schooling, greater attention must be devoted to preparing students for higher education and providing immediate supports for those who are not doing well.
- Recruitment for higher education must begin early, with potent outreach to and support for underrepresented groups of students.
- Transition programs should include careful monitoring of students so that additional academic and social supports are provided quickly for those who are not doing well.
- Ongoing monitoring is necessary to enhance retention rates.

As always, the reality of individual differences means that some new students may not be responsive to or comfortable with transition program activities. Effective programs must be as personalized intervention as feasible if they are to be responsive to the needs of such students. They also must be prepared to mobilize family and peer support when problems arise.

A Few Relevant Reference and Resources

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