

# A **Happy** Mess: Transitional Challenges of College Seniors who are First- Generation (1-G)

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National Conference on Students in Transition  
November 2010, Houston, TX

# ***The purpose of this study...***

... to explore how traditional-age college seniors who are first-generation experience their final year of undergraduate study, and how they ascribe meaning to these experiences.

# ***The purpose of this presentation...***

... to call attention to this student population with unique transitional issues, share findings, and suggest institutional responses which may affect 'retention' of emerging alumni.

*It all began with a student appointment  
full of tears (hers, not mine)*

- ❖ Review: What we know about first-generation students
- ❖ Review: What we know about transitioning senior-year students
- ❖ Significance to institutions (demographic growth, institutional reputation, retention redefined as alumni)

# *Research Questions:*

- (1) What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation (1-G) college seniors' transition into adulthood?
- (2) What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do 1-G college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?

# *Theoretical framework: Adult Transition Theory and 4 S System*

- ❖ Nancy Schlossberg, 1984
- ❖ Developed for the express purpose of helping adults in transition understand and adjust to significant change

## Taking Stock of Coping Resources (the 4-S System)

- Situation
- Self
- Support
- Strategies

*This system provide an excellent organizing framework for talking with transitioning individuals about their experience.*

# *Methodology*

- ❖ Phenomenological approach
- ❖ Data collection used personal interviews
  - ▢ Follow-up via email and phone calls
  - ▢ Eight participants; all volunteer
    - Represented majors in sciences, education, liberal arts, business
- ❖ Qualitative Data analysis method
  - ▢ Significant statements/themes (content analysis)
  - ▢ Horizontalization/non-repeated/uniqueness
  - ▢ Frequency counting
  - ▢ Attribution of positivity/negativity

# *Results: Organized around the 4-S System*

- ❖ Situation Themes
- ❖ Self Themes
- ❖ Support Themes
- ❖ Strategy Themes

*Situation: trigger events, duration, sense of familiarity, sense of control*

❖ Themes for how 1-G seniors defined and understood the transitional *situation*:

- “A Happy Mess”: Emotional Confusion
- Post-college Activities
- Family as Support **and** as Strain
- Marking the End

# *Self: Identity, confidence, ego, clarity of strengths and weaknesses*

- ❖ Themes emerged related to their sense of self
  - “How to be a Different Person”: Intellectual Growth
  - Adulthood Status
  - Separateness
  - First-Generation Pride and Pressure

# *Support: helpers and resources*

- ❖ Themes related to sources of assistance to manage transition more effectively
  - The Helpers: Family, Faculty and Friends
  - What I Really Need to Know is...

# *Strategies: tools and action plans*

- ❖ Themes reflecting intentional actions to manage transition
  - Healthy Diversions
  - Organizing Actions

*RQ 1: What archetypal experiences during the final year of college have noteworthy influence on first-generation college seniors' transition into adulthood?*

- ❖ Institutional communications
- ❖ Preparing for post-college life
- ❖ Changing personal relationships

*RQ 2: What, if any, mechanisms (personal and institutional) do first-generation college seniors use to make meaning and create understanding of this experience?*

- ❖ Closure behaviors
- ❖ Acknowledging emotions
- ❖ Creating new self-labels and identities
- ❖ Assuming family leadership role

# *Methodological Cautions*

## ❖ Small population

- Interviews limited breadth of topics
- No conversational synergy

## ❖ Topic diffusion

## *What might be next? (for further study)*

- ❖ Replicate with larger population?
- ❖ How does gender play on transition?
- ❖ Multiple sources of data (blogs, journals)?
- ❖ Older populations (+23)?
- ❖ Private institution?
- ❖ Compare first-generation seniors to legacy seniors; are there differences?
- ❖ Parents' views of their sons' and daughters' transitions?

# *What could/should we be doing?*

- ❖ Excellent opportunity for colleges to build targeted interventions for first-generation students *throughout the college years*
- ❖ Possible outreach to parents/families of 1-G to help them adjust to the changes their daughters/sons/siblings/cousins are experiencing and answer their questions about college
- ❖ Career services and career development centers could expand beyond career fairs and resume workshops
- ❖ Senior-year specialists (*ala* first-year deans, FYE)
- ❖ Consider ways we are fostering *first-generation alumni* (re-think the term 'retention')

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