

## ***Shedding Light on Sophomores: An Exploration of the Second College Year (Monograph No. 47)***

By Barbara F. Tobolowsky and Bradley E. Cox

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Higher education continues to evolve to meet the needs of its constituents and stakeholders and to respond to the marketplace. The competitive landscape of higher education and a constant battle for resources has led institutions to focus on the retention of students. While many colleges and universities across the country have been responsive to the needs of first-year students, intentionally attending to students' needs after that point is relatively rare. It could be argued that front-loading institutional efforts only delay student attrition and may not have long term impact on the retention of students. The authors and editors of *Shedding Light on Sophomores: An Exploration of the Second College Year* respond to the lack of initiatives for second-year students by calling attention to successful sophomore initiatives across a variety of institutional types and provide direction for those who are considering similar efforts.

The forward of the monograph presents the rationale behind the publication and discusses earlier attempts to gather information on sophomore initiatives. The editors also offer a context for and an overview of the subsequent chapters.

The first chapter provides the monograph's context by expanding on the development of sophomore students. By addressing psychosocial, cognitive developmental, and transition theories of student development and their application to sophomores, the author grounds the chapters which follow. Readers are encouraged to consider how developmental theories should be interpreted when applied to sophomores. The remainder of the first chapter, contributed by Molly A. Schaller, addresses the concept of the "sophomore slump" as well as the movement through typical sophomore issues such as random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment. Transition theories seem especially relevant to the movement of sophomores through the stages highlighted above, and a strong case can be made for paying greater attention to these transitions for our second-year students.

Moving beyond the theoretical context, the second chapter, written by Barbara Tobolowsky and Bradley Cox, presents the results of a 2005 national survey on sophomore initiatives conducted with 382 institutions. Overall, one third (33.5%) responded that they offered at least one initiative specifically or intentionally geared toward sophomores. Many of these efforts focused on career planning and the selection of a major. Survey results are presented in table form and are accompanied by brief discussions of vehicles for the delivery of these initiatives including academic advising, curricular offerings, residence life programming, financial aid workshops, sophomore class events, and targeted publications such as brochures and newsletters. The chapter also reports on where these programs are housed administratively and on the association between sophomore-specific activities and services.

Chapter Three, authored by Ann Gansemer-Topf, Joyce Stern, and Mimi Benjamin, summarizes recent research on sophomore programs at small, highly selective, residential, private liberal arts college settings in the Midwest. The study describes the theoretical and conceptual framework, methodology, and assessment of existing efforts for second-year students. The unique aspects of these institutions and the importance of continued research are discussed. Findings from the study asserted that the challenges of the second-year student intersect in academic life, social relationships, and extracurricular activities. This chapter also raises the provocative question: "Is it our sophomores who are slumping or our institutional environments?" (p. 44). Readers are asked to consider the drop-off from many institutional initiatives available to students in their first year (i.e., new student orientation, welcome week programs, learning communities, and first-year seminars) to relatively few in the second year even though academic, social, and emotional needs still exist for these students. The chapter ends with the suggestion that, in addition to being aware of developmental changes within students, we must also pay attention to how campus environments can "lessen or compound the challenges of the second year" (p. 45).

Chapters Four through Seven describe best practices in sophomore initiatives at four colleges and universities. The efforts of two small private institutions, Beloit College and Colorado College, are detailed in Chapters Four and Five respectively. As one of the oldest and most well developed programs on the sophomore year experience, Beloit College's collection of initiatives--including a sophomore retreat, a major exploration and declaration fair, the "My Academic Plan" (MAP) system, and venture grants to support groups of students who propose projects to benefit themselves, others, or the campus community--is seen as a pioneer in the aspects of research, programmatic efforts, and assessment of the sophomore year. Assessment results indicate that retention has improved at Beloit College, perhaps due to the collaboration of faculty and staff in creating a more responsive educational environment for sophomores.

Similarly, Colorado College (Chapter 5) has developed a set of programs aimed at improving retention after the second college year based on input from student focus groups and surveys of upperclass students who had served as first-year student mentors. The approach taken by this institution involved

creating a position to coordinate program components, surveying existing campus programs, balancing academic and social aspects of the second-year experience, offering a sophomore living-learning community, and partnering between Academic and Student Affairs, particularly with the Career Center. Activities and events specifically for sophomores include a welcome back luau, a faculty-sophomore dinner series, departmental events for prospective majors, a one-day sophomore workshop, and sophomore-specific advising.

Kennesaw State University's "Year 2 Kennesaw: The Sophomore Year Experience (Y2K)" program is the subject of Chapter 6. Kennesaw is a public, four-year institution of more than 18,500 students based in northwest metropolitan Atlanta. As with most second-year programs, Y2K took a careful approach to putting together an SYE program in 2003 and has expanded from there, based on resources and the campus culture. Components now include the Sophomore Peer Leaders program, a Major Mentors program, and UpperCLASS sophomore learning communities. A major variable examined in this chapter is the importance of growing sophomore initiatives out of available resources and the unique identity of the campus culture and institutional ethos. As a former two-year institution, Kennesaw continues to struggle to completely transition to the culture of a four-year school. This chapter also acknowledges that developing SYE programs on larger campuses usually is gradual, with an acknowledgement that such institutions cannot institute across-the-board initiatives for all or even the majority of sophomores.

Chapter Seven is a case study of Colgate University's Sophomore-Year Experience (SYE), which evolved from a year-long planning process in 2002. External financial support has assisted in developing a comprehensive approach at this campus of 2,700 students. Multiple components are described, including sophomore class council events, Democracy Dinners, Dialogue Circles, living-learning communities, a trip to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, a mentoring program where Colgate sophomores mentor high school sophomores, and an alternative spring break trip to explore non-profit, non-governmental organizations. A unique aspect to Colgate's SYE is its thematic grounding; an emphasis on democracy and civic engagement permeates this institution's initiatives.

The final chapter of this monograph presents recommendations for those seeking to establish or institutionalize efforts for sophomores. Salient advice is given on reviewing current campus policies to ensure that they are supporting sophomore success. A discussion of ways to connect sophomore students to academically purposeful activities, including undergraduate research, advising, career planning, major exploration, leadership development, study abroad programs, and student mentoring, is also presented. Tobolowsky and Cox, who wrote the closing chapter, offer three recommendations for managing the SYE implementation process: learn from the students themselves, perform a campus audit, and don't work alone (pp. 95-97).

This relatively short monograph will be useful to institutions seeking a starting point for SYE efforts as well as for those who are in the early stages of

development. Although some readers may not identify with the demographics and institutional profiles of the institutions included, most of the best practices contained in the chapters can be beneficial and adapted to a variety of colleges and universities.

The authors consistently assert that the sophomore year can be a “lost year” or a potential chasm into which students may fall. Front-loaded efforts and heightened attention to first-year students may lead to a sense of security that is lost during the second year when such supports are not as readily available. Sophomores may not require “hand-holding” as much as they need opportunities to explore ways to define their identities academically, socially, emotionally, and interpersonally. Overall, this much needed monograph provides a starting point and a springboard for discussing, planning, and implementing sophomore year initiatives.