

Encountering Adulthood: College as a Rite of Passage

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The transition from high school to college has become a de facto rite of passage in modern American life. There is an absence of consensus in the culture of what might constitute authentic markers of movement from adolescence to emerging adulthood. Thus, higher education is faced with the challenge of initiating adolescents into intentions, dispositions, and habits of character and intellect that might comport with what is understood to be healthy adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Elbot & Fulton, 2008; Fleischer, 2005).

Keene State College's Integrative Studies Program (formerly the General Education Program) purposefully helps students develop an understanding of how they and others engage their worlds. The integrative teaching and learning process approaches academics and residential life in intentionally connected ways. The program attempts to encourage self-aware and reflective learning and practice. Integrative learning often occurs as students put theory into practice, "making meaning" as students apply abstract concepts in relevant, "real-world" settings, whether it be in service learning in the community, or where they live in student housing.

In adapting this new (inaugurated in 2007) Integrative Studies Program, the college placed particular focus on the reality of the transition experience of entering first-year students. For example, traditional English Composition was replaced with a required "integrative thinking and writing" course, topic-based seminars that could address challenges of psychological engagement and emotional intelligence that often lead first-year students to getting off on the wrong foot academically or socially.

As such, in these first-year writing courses, we develop teaching strategies that seek to engage and encourage the emerging voice of the adolescent in transition. Recalling the maxim that "emotion drives attention, and attention drives learning," (Sylwester, 1994, p. 61) we ask students to "make it personal" as they evaluate multiple perspectives and develop their own in a semester-long, sustained thinking and writing project. Students evaluate a variety of sources and perspectives on topics that animate them, create a complex, supportable argument or claim, and weave their own informed perspective into a narrative that speaks to an emerging sense of identity. This initiation into becoming a scholar (Blumenkrantz, 1992) is part of a larger effort at Keene State to reframe college as a place of passage into

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adult life.

One example of these required, first-year “thinking and writing” classes is “Encountering Adulthood.” It is a cross-cultural study of how adults initiate their young into adulthood, with particular emphasis on modern American rites of passage. We look deeply at the markers of adulthood, such as they are in American culture, and we make it personal. This, after all, is where traditional college students are in their life, betwixt and between, no longer a child, not really an adult. They are in that liminal space where they are seeking an abiding identity that personifies who they really are, and might become (Arnett, 2004; Goleman, 1995, Kessler, 2000). They are in that place that Jeffrey Arnett calls “emerging adulthood,” and they, and their mentors, are longing for that emergence.

Students are asked, what is the culture telling them about what it means to be an adult? Where are the messages coming from, and who is offering them? After studying how cultures have, for thousands of years, consciously and intentionally initiated young people into an adult life of purpose and intention (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & van Bockern, 1990), the question is posed: how are you being mentored, and by whom?

One might imagine that the responses are not encouraging—that the adult world is not really showing up, that the young are essentially initiating each other into what they think it means to be an adult, and that the markers are the surface of what the adult world portrays as “independence”—alcohol, drugs, sex, having a car, money to spend. Invariably in class discussions and anonymous surveys conducted by Residential Life over the past two years with first-year students at Keene State, binge drinking is identified as the singular rite of passage that happens in the transition to college.

At the same time, our experience with these young adult students suggests that they want a lot more than that, more than the surface markers of adulthood. They particularly want the mentors to show up, the initiated adults who are living a life of integrity, generativity, and responsibility for emerging adults. That, ultimately, is what it appears they are hoping for from college faculty and staff. In surveys conducted in both first year classes as well as by Student Affairs, students consistently report that respected mentors are critical to their academic and interpersonal success.

Based on assessments conducted by the Integrative Studies Program over the past three years, there is evidence that the mentored learning that students experience in their semester-long “thinking and writing” projects is producing results. Faculty reviews of their work are indicating significant improvements in measures of multiple perspective-taking and applying critical thinking. At the same time, students, staff and faculty are reporting increased satisfaction and engagement with both academic product and process. Students report that they are being “taken more seriously.” Faculty report that in these small first-year seminars, students demonstrably begin to shed the “adolescent, high school perspective” as they apply critical thinking to issues that they are living through in the transition to adulthood. Staff at the College’s Center for Writing note the increased “engagement and accountability” of students.

The “Encountering Adulthood” course has been selected to be the common first-year Integrative Thinking and Writing course for students entering the College’s Honors Program. It was selected as representative of cross-campus efforts to reframe college as a place of engaged scholarship and personal development, where adolescents can become adults.

The response to the course has also encouraged a joint Academic Affairs/ Student Affairs grant initiative, utilizing alcohol and drug abuse prevention funds, that attempts to reframe the faux college “rite of passage” of binge drinking. It is the objective of this project to convey an alternative vision to first year students, student leaders, and staff, faculty, and community mentors, to establish positive college experiences as a rite of passage to a healthy adulthood. The major goal of the grant initiative is to begin to develop an infrastructure and capacity at Keene State College that can address the particular challenges of a perceived rite of passage for beginning students.

With this goal in mind, the Keene State College Rite of Passage Initiative was piloted during orientation week in the fall of 2010. Trainings and presentations were offered to a wide variety of campus constituencies, including first-year students, student leaders, faculty, staff, and administration. At the outset of the initiative, the campus community engaged with ideas and strategies for developing academic and student affairs experiences that offer alternatives to messages that encourage drinking as a perceived passage to adulthood by:

- **Reframing the Problem:** Acknowledging that college is a place of initiation, where young people come of age and are mentored in their development as adults.
- **Development & Training of a Leadership Team:** Bringing together the diverse citizenry of a college community—students, staff, faculty and administration—to create and support a team of community leaders who take responsibility for sustaining the college initiative, and for mentoring first-year students.
- **Creating a Positive Context for Declaring Independence:** Providing a structure that guides entering students in investigating and connecting with health-promoting activities, while developing abilities to make responsible decisions.
- **Engaging Parents:** Providing resources and communications for parents on how to support their sons’ and daughters’ adjustment to, and success in, college.
- **Giving Students Responsibility for Mentoring the Next Class:** Creating opportunities for first-year students to give back to the college community in subsequent years by becoming college leaders and mentors.
- **Orient Students to College:** Building skills necessary for academic and social success and competence, helping them find “their place” for their pursuit of happiness and healthy fun, exploring ways to be of service and to mentor others.

Initial assessments of students, faculty, and staff reaction to the orientation week events have contributed to the development of a cross-campus infrastructure that will develop policy and programming in related areas such as alcohol and drug use, first-year experience, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and student civic engagement.

The long-term goal of this college-wide initiative—and the academic initiative described above, from whence it evolved—is to encourage a cultural shift at our college, beginning by acknowledging students’ natural impulses to create rite of passage experiences to test and affirm their transition from teenagers to adults. It engages the entire college community in guiding those impulses toward safe, productive leisure-time activities, while supporting academic success. Reframing college as a passage to adult identity is paving the way for a potentially significant transition in the academic and social experience of college.

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