

Considerations for Orientation Programming: Preparing for the Homeschooled Student

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While many different college student populations have been studied in the college transition literature, there are few studies investigating homeschoolers' transition to college. This study reports findings from a qualitative study which investigated the experiences of first-year students who were homeschooled. Implications for those working in orientation and transition programming are discussed.

Considerations for Orientation Programming: Preparing for the Homeschooled Student

The research on orientation programming is quite extensive (Keup, 2006; Barefoot, 2005) and can offer much advice in terms of best practice. While many different populations have been studied in the literature on college student orientation and transition, one population which has not garnered much attention is that of homeschoolers transitioning to college. Homeschooled students (also referred to as home educated or homeschoolers) are those who did not attend traditional public or private schools, but met compulsory education requirements by being educated at home by at least one parent or guardian (Cogan, 2010). The number of home-educated students in the United States has been growing steadily each year for more than a decade (Bielick, 2008; Hill, 2000; Ray, 1997). Findings from the National Household Education Surveys Program conducted through the U.S. Department of Education indicated that 1.5 million students were being homeschooled in 2007 (Bielick, 2008), and the growth does not appear to be slowing (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001).

With growth like this and estimates that at least 30,000 homeschooled students matriculate into colleges and universities each year (Cox, 2003), it seems prudent for those involved in orientation and transition programming to consider how the population of homeschooled students can be served. To date, there are limited studies focused on homeschoolers' transition to college or college experience in general which can inform practice (Bolle, Wessel, & Mulvihill, 2007; Duggan, 2010; Kranzow, 2005).

Although not extensive, the initial research on this population posits that homeschooled students are socially and academically ready to transition and

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perform well in college (Kranzow, 2005; Galloway & Sutton, 1995). Analysis of their academic performance indicates that they are as well-prepared for college as their traditionally schooled peers (Cogan, 2010; Jones & Gloeckner, 2004). In a recent study by Duggan (2010), homeschoolers reported high levels of many positive behaviors and abilities relevant to pre-college preparation (in most cases even higher than their private-schooled or public-schooled peers).

Although the research on homeschooled students in regard to their academic and social readiness for college seems optimistic, there is still a paucity of research on this population (Cogan, 2010; Kranzow, 2005). Without additional and ongoing studies, nothing definitive can be determined about this population. Furthermore, without research to guide practice, much time, money, and effort could be spent on programming which might not be appropriate for this population of students. In an effort to contribute to a better understanding of this population, this study investigated the first-year experiences of students who were homeschooled. The study and its findings should serve as a resource for those working with orientation and transition programs which seek to reach out to and support entering students from homeschooling backgrounds.

Theoretical Lens

Weidman's (1989) undergraduate socialization model served as the primary lens in this particular study because of the emphasis on the interplay between parental socialization and its potential to impact transition to college. While different scholars in higher education incorporate student background characteristics into their models of student departure and college impact (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), Weidman's work addresses student socialization to college, suggesting that experiences with parents and non-college reference groups are important background characteristics. In fact, Weidman states that "...since the effects of parental socialization are so very likely to persist during the course of the student's college years, parental pressures and expectations may serve to mediate the impact of college experiences" (1989, p. 122).

This model recognizes that student background characteristics (such as values, socio-economic status, and aptitudes), non-college reference groups (including peers and employers), parental socialization (parent/child relationship, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status), and institutional characteristics work together and jointly account for how a student becomes acclimated and socialized to the undergraduate college environment.

Method

This study was undertaken with the permission of the institutional review board and administrators at the universities where research was gathered. In terms of site selection, Christian institutions were selected for this research because up to 10% of students at some Christian colleges and universities come

from self-identified Christian homes (Klicka, 2006). Furthermore, many parents of homeschoolers have stated that instilling Christian beliefs was a reason for choosing to homeschool (Stevens, 2001). Although many public institutions accept homeschooled students, the number of homeschoolers in any given year is generally 50 students or fewer (Klicka, 2006). Since Christian institutions may be leaders in terms of reaching out to meet the needs of this specific population, selecting two Christian institutions seemed a logical starting point for research in this area.

A purposeful sampling technique (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2001) was used to select students from two Christian universities in the Midwest. As the name implies, purposeful sampling involved choosing participants who would be likely to help the researcher understand the particular population in a deeper way. The criteria for the students to be identified by institutional administrators included two considerations: a) individuals must have been homeschooled during at least their high school years, and b) students needed to be traditional age students (age 18–22) in their first or second year of college.

Use of these two criteria ensured that selected students shared similarities in age and recent educational experiences, while still allowing for (although not guaranteeing) variations in other areas (e.g., socioeconomic background, parental education). The eligible students were contacted to determine participation interest. In total, 18 students (nine from each institution) were interviewed for the study. A semi-structured interview format was used, allowing room for discussions to arise (Merriam, 2009). The direction of the discussions was, therefore, determined by the participants as well as by the researcher. The students who participated in the study were initially interviewed for about an hour, and interviews were tape recorded with permission.

Following all interviews, the raw data were transcribed by the researcher. The entire interview transcripts were then reviewed, coded, and analyzed for emergent themes (Cresswell, 2009). To increase the credibility or trustworthiness of the findings, member checking or validation of comments was conducted through focus groups (Merriam, 2009). All students who initially participated in interviews were invited to attend a focus group where the emerging themes were discussed to ensure that the researcher was accurately capturing what the participants were saying. Seven students who chose to attend the focus group spent another 45 minutes discussing their thoughts with the researcher.

Results

The findings from the study resulted in three themes that are important to understanding the transition of homeschooled students to college and the impact on orientation programming. These themes of common academic struggles, out-of-class activities, and faculty relationships will be detailed and the implications discussed.

Academic Struggles

Consistent with research (Rudner, 1999), the homeschoolers in this study appeared academically prepared for college as they were successful in terms of academic performance. In spite of this fact, the homeschooled students needed to adjust to the classroom environments and instructors' teaching styles and techniques since most homeschoolers have not had a variety of experiences in those areas. In addition, new demands in terms of how students must study and demonstrate learning appear to affect many homeschoolers emotionally. There were a number of students who, although confident about their academic capabilities in general, seemed uneasy about their readiness to work within the classroom structures and demands found in their college classrooms. The following three student statements express their concerns about being prepared for the college environment:

- Going from studying on your own to all of a sudden going into a classroom, having to take notes and having someone firing questions at you ... some of the students struggle...sometimes initially [it] is hard, but for the homeschooler who's not used to 50 minutes [of class], let alone 3 hours; that's a tough one.
- I wasn't prepared really for the writing.... My first couple papers, I was pretty scared to turn in.... It would take me forever to write a four-page paper, and now—I guess it only took a year—but now I can do a 10-page paper in a day.
- [During] freshman year, getting used to doing homework was a little annoying because in homeschool all my school work was homework. But I got used to it probably by spring semester that year.

The above statements indicate that although these students were prepared succeed academically, there were new demands for which they needed time to adjust in their new environment.

Choice of Activities

In terms of co-curricular activities, students were asked about their involvement outside the classroom. It is important to note that the activities students mentioned tended to be informal, non-structured activities. Only three of the 18 students were involved in structured activities that met at least weekly. Most students socialized with others in their residence hall. Some occasionally attended activities planned by a resident director or a student activities staff member. The major portion of the students' social lives took place in their residence halls.

Other activities that students took part in included watching movies, going shopping, and chatting over coffee. One student said of participation in formal activities:

I hope to eventually [get involved], but I'm not [now] just 'cause I'm trying to be cautious The guys in my suite get together. I'd eventually like to get

signed up for some type of sports activity.

Another participant said that the most difficult area to get used to at college “was trying to figure out what things to get involved in and what things would be too much...trying to balance that with knowing how much time my classes would take.” Even traditionally educated students often find time management in the first year of college a challenge (Light, 2001), so it is logical that homeschooled students might find it particularly challenging.

Faculty Connections

A theme that arose in nearly every interview was that the homeschooled students, on the whole, felt connected with the faculty, were able to approach them, and felt comfortable building relationships with them. This is important because the literature has shown faculty/student relationships to be an important factor in academic success and retention (Berger & Milem, 1999; Chambers, 2010; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The homeschooled students seem to respect faculty members for their positions, while also viewing them as friends and individuals who are part of the community with them.

When students were asked directly about their relationships with faculty and whether or not they knew any of their professors personally, 14 of the 18 students spoke of their comfort level with the faculty. One student said:

I have no fear of going up to a professor... asking an opinion, asking what's on the final exam, or joking with them. I have no trouble doing that. It's no big deal.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

In light of the findings, those administrators involved in orientation and transition programming might consider the following recommendations when evaluating their programs for appropriateness for the homeschooled students entering their institutions. These recommendations, while specifically intended to support the homeschooled student transitioning to college, are not major deviations from program recommendations for traditional populations; so in times of tight budgets, it should be considered that all students stand to benefit from the supports mentioned in the following analysis.

Orientation to Academic Support Services

Orientation and transition programming which introduces students to institutional supports for academic challenges is essential. Homeschooled students need to adapt to the college learning environment. Many campuses provide assistance with writing papers, and homeschooled students may wish to utilize this benefit. Additionally,

assistance with note taking or understanding their personal learning styles might be valuable to this population. Interviews revealed that students would benefit from gaining this information earlier in the semester.

Peer Mentoring

Another support which might greatly assist the homeschooled student in his or her college transition is a peer mentor. Many campuses offer a peer mentor program (Howard & Smith-Goodwin, 2010; Rosenthal & Shinebarger, 2010). If given the option of being matched up with another homeschooler, many homeschoolers stated that they would likely participate. New students could ask more experienced homeschoolers about adjustment issues like balancing academics and activities, or learning certain aspects of the college experience. Additionally, knowing someone else who comes from a similar or familiar environment may be comforting.

Early Connection to Faculty

The data suggest that homeschoolers find an important connection with faculty. This need for connection likely stems from the fact that homeschoolers are accustomed to making significant connections with their instructor, typically a parent, in prior years. The importance of this relationship should be cultivated through encouraging opportunities for first-year students or students in transition to interact with faculty early. For smaller institutions, this might be managed through small gatherings or receptions with faculty or small seminar classes. For larger institutions desiring to help build this important connection, encouraging homeschooled students to enroll in first-year experience courses taught by full-time faculty would be an important step. Other options include having faculty advisors involved in Freshman Interest Groups or learning communities which are smaller by nature, and encouraging students to get to know both other students and the professional faculty or staff involved with the programming.

Other Implications

Homeschooled students entering college seem to prefer participating in more informal rather than formal activities, so connections to the institution and involvement with other students may need to be established in the ways previously mentioned. Furthermore, as Weidman (1989) suggested, the impact of student activities and organizations may not be as great for those coming from homeschooling backgrounds. Even an informal activity with other residence hall students, no matter how intriguing, may likely be passed over by homeschooled students with other prior social commitments such as church or family activities. Strong family ties, home community, church, and prior connections with non-college friends seem to have more impact on college students from homeschooling

backgrounds than programs or individuals on the college campus.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited in scope since it only evaluated homeschoolers in Christian colleges, and the study involved a small number of participants (18). It would be advantageous for future studies to observe homeschooled students at a greater number and variety of institutions. Future research might also investigate whether homeschoolers adjust in a similar manner in larger or public institutions. There is one study investigating self-reported information from homeschoolers attending community colleges (Duggan, 2010), but additional studies looking at homeschooled students in the community college environment would also be valuable.

Conclusion

Homeschoolers can face additional challenges in their transition to college from that of traditionally educated students. If homeschooled students are to be both supported and retained, institutions need to consider how best to assist them during the orientation and transition periods. The good news is that this and other studies (Cogan, 2010; Jones & Gloeckner, 2004) indicate that homeschoolers show both the desire and the capability to succeed. They simply need additional, focused support. This study suggests ways in which faculty, staff, and peers can lend support to homeschoolers in their transition.

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