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Needs and Best Practices for Transfer to Our Four-year Institutions: The Results of Survey Research

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary concerns for college programs focus on the ability of the program to prepare students to become employable upon graduation. For a community college psychology program, that focus is somewhat muted by the fact that many of the community college graduates will transfer to four-year state universities. For this reason, it is imperative for the community college programs to ascertain from those four-year institutions what preparation those transferring students need. This study has captured what fourteen state public university psychology departments desire for transferring students and what they see as lacking in their students transferring from community colleges. The responding department chairs strongly cited basic scholarship skills, a stronger orientation toward critical and scientific thinking, and a professional and career focus in the transferring students.

In particular, for a community college psychology department that offers no particular psychology major, this focus translates to the question of how well it can prepare its students for transfer to four-year institutions.

Keywords: phenomenology, teaching objectives, scholarship skills, community colleges, student transfers, career focus, college psychology

In today's political climate, both economic needs and mounting student loan debt in default have led to a focus on college instruction and degree programs taking on serious accountability for their graduates actually becoming employed upon completion of their education. The pressure, coming from both the White House and state legislatures, has awakened the conversation of employability in both certificate-focused non-degree programs and academic liberal arts four-year degree structures. Community colleges, as providers of both non-credit and credit education, feel both types of pressures and have turned their focus on the effectiveness of their efforts. In particular, for a community college psychology department that offers no particular psychology major, this focus translates to the question of how well it can prepare its students for transfer to four-year institutions, whether those transfer students will become eventual psychology majors or will simply use their community college psychology learning experiences for elective credits.

According to the Virginia Community College System website (Impact, 2016), there are over 262,000 students attending the Commonwealth's community colleges, representing about 60% of all state undergraduates. About 56% of community college graduates are currently in transfer programs to one of the Commonwealth's more than 25 public and private four-year institutions which share guaranteed admission agreements with the community colleges (Impact, 2016). According to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (2016), 7,395 students alone attended four-year public institutions in 2015 after earning their associate degrees at a Virginia community college. These statistics represent a heavy responsibility for the community colleges in general and for our community college psychology department in particular, leading to the need to open up and maintain effective communication between the community colleges and the four-year institutions in order that proper educational objectives are met and students are adequately prepared both for the four-year classroom and later employment.

THE LITERATURE

The goal of preparing students for transfer and later employment begins with an understanding of learning objectives. The literature on general educational objectives for the higher education classroom tells an interesting story of the contrast between instructors' and students' expectations for these objectives. In their classic study, Betts and Liow (1993) developed a list of 13 instructional objectives for higher education, which they presented to instructors and students to be ranked. The instructors favored analytical thinking and understanding the main concepts, as well as developing problem solving skills and an interest in the discipline, as the four most important learning objectives generally. On the other hand, the students themselves sought preparing for a career and developing practical application skills as the most important, followed by thinking analytically and understanding the main concepts (Betts and Liow, 1993). As the four least important objectives, the instructors ranked gathering factual information, preparing for exams, developing specialized knowledge, and organizing time and ideas, while the students found exam preparation to be relatively important, replacing it on the low priority list with developing independent learning skills (Betts and Liow, 1993). It is interesting how students seemed to orient their learning experiences toward future use in careers and were less oriented toward achieving "good student status," while faculty are more concerned with practices that could be centered on that idea of what it means to be a "good student".

In 1999, Bonner studied the alignment of teaching methods with objectives in a specific discipline, adhering to Gagne's taxonomy of learning and positing the importance of using a variety of methods in the classroom in order to match specific expectations of the students concerning their learning objectives. While the discipline she studied was accounting and the methods described rather more pertinent to twentieth century pedagogy focusing on recall and not twenty-first century heutagogy and andragogy, Bonner (1999) stressed the same importance of developing the cognitive strategies and analytical thinking encouraged in Betts and Liow's (1993) study. Again, this spoke of an ideal for what being a good student entails.

In comparison with and contrast to the literature of the twentieth century, contemporary studies of learning and teaching objectives in higher education seem to fall into four distinct categories. O'Keefe, Lopez, Xu, and Lall (2014) analyzed business class pedagogies, focusing on two areas of student development: understanding and skills. Developing understanding focused inward as the student should master the fundamental concepts, roles, relationships, and sources of information pertinent to the discipline, while developing the skills requisite to success in the career field focuses outward (O'Keefe, et al, 2014). This inward-outward dichotomy challenges us to turn from a presupposed ideal of good scholarship to focus also on a career orientation. With this focus, Chun (2010) took a contrasting perspective to O'Keefe's (2014) focus on the inward fundamentals, one distinctly cognitive, in emphasizing the importance of preparing students for success through exposing them to authentic tasks and real-life content with inquiry and problem solving. His list of objectives included the importance of taking multiple perspectives, critical evaluation, evidence analysis, dispassionate reasoning, and informed decision-making (Chun, 2010). Fryer, Ginns, and Walker (2014) posited that students' internally focused, mastery orientation toward learning resulting from opportunities to practice goal framing and exposure to student-oriented instructors as models, will result in positive long-term effects on study and learning effort and later achievement. Geitz, Brinke, and Kirschner (2015) elaborated on this idea of the mastery orientation toward learning concluding that sustainable feedback to the students, in which they are actively involved in their own assessment and feedback, provides a significant effect on their perceived mastery.

Learning objectives also go beyond the conceptual and cognitive foci, however. In their research on international education as essential to nation building, Abari, Oyetola, and Okunuga (2014) described the three-fold objectives of instruction as containing the dissemination and teaching of information and the involvement of the student in his or her community, as well as the development of research in the disciplines. This focus on community involvement could mirror O'Keefe, et al. (2014) in their focus on developing useful and effective skills, as well as point toward Murray's (2015) research on student transformation and development. Ozolins (2015) also took the same tack on learning in terms of having an effect on the larger society of the world in describing effect as a means of students' developing wisdom. Wisdom development took the form of three levels of understanding: the self, relationships with others, and moral direction and choice (Ozolins, 2015).

Learning should address self-development, as well as social development. In describing a special development program at the Virginia Commonwealth University, Murray (2015) took instructional objectives inward, positing that higher education should give students the opportunity to build personal confidence and skills with written and oral communication, leadership, metacognition, and collaboration. Turner (2014) defined this confidence as self-belief, describing how successful students believe that ability can be improved, they can be successful, and their learning environment will allow for improvement and success. These perspectives should challenge the contemporary professor to meet these objectives and facilitate his or her students meeting them as well.

Purpose of this Study

Based on the literature, there is a consistent belief that students should be developed and transformed by their learning opportunities, although there is a diversity of perspectives on what that may look like. For this reason, this study will seek to uncover what psychology instructors in the state's four-year public institutions see as important factors of student development, both in what should be required and what is lacking in our contemporary transfers.

METHODOLOGY

Inspired and challenged by the needs of the four-year institutions, the contemporary emphasis on job preparation, and the literature on the multiple objectives of higher education learning, this researcher developed a small qualitative study to tap into the lines of communication between the psychology department of Thomas Nelson community college and those of the Commonwealth's 14 public universities. Because of the potentially nebulous list of educational objectives, especially those focused on an ideal of how a good student or scholar should behave and think, instead of focusing on the objective reality of the classroom, I chose to attempt to capture the subjective realities of practitioners of the university classroom through a phenomenological study, focusing on the practical observations and ideas of the psychology instructors themselves. The phenomenological approach is most appropriate here because the instructors are those directly interacting with the community college students; their perspectives are essentially more valuable than those with no practical stake in the students' experiences.

In focusing on college psychology programs, my purpose was to start with an open-ended query of what each department chair considered the main objective of an associate degree level of educational preparation, and then to provide a forum to consider what areas are most lacking in community college transfers and what specific educational practices might be undertaken by faculty. I undertook this query in a mass e-mailing to all the psychology chairpersons in the state's four-year public institutions. The questions were as follows:

1. What knowledge and or skills would you like to see community college transfer students possess in order to be ready to learn in your program?

2. In what areas do you find community college transfer students most lacking?

3. Do you have any suggestions as to what you would like us in the community colleges to be doing?

One of the perceived complaints of higher education practitioners is the lack of time to carry out face-to-face interactions with their own colleagues and students. For this reason, I chose to employ open-ended email interviewing as a methodology instead of seeking formal appointments to sit and discuss the questions with the department chairs. As to potential ambiguity in the questions and the invalidation of collected data resultant in a diversity of

interpretations of questioned concepts, the choice was made to forgo any focus groups that might have established more reliability in the questioning. The reason for this is to provide opportunities for the participants to take the questions in diverse and personal directions and therefore provide useful insight to those using the resulting data.

RESULTS

Mirroring the literature on learning objectives in higher education, the survey results showed a distinct concern for both professional preparation and the importance of the skills and knowledge associated with college psychology. The answers fell into four general categories of responses: skills, focus, attitude, and knowledge of psychology.

As far as learning skills in undergraduate psychology, our four-year universities desire math and writing skills above the others. Responses concerning writing skills addressed such areas as research paper construction, familiarity with the APA format, facility with diction and theses, and information literacy. Particularly cited in the results was the apparent poverty of essay construction ability in our community college students.

As far as math skills are concerned, college psychology programs cite a desire for students to have some understanding of and experience with carrying out research and statistical analyses. More specifically, quite a few programs expressed a need for students to approach problems analytically and critically, in keeping with the information literacy mentioned above. One school even mentioned the lack of general quantitative skills in transferring students, though the exact meaning of this is unclear.

Concerning specific skills in and knowledge of psychology, we in community colleges are encouraged to empower our students with a solid foundational knowledge of psychology in all of its perspectives, especially a familiarity with research methods, cognition, and perception. Some responses called for students to have a wider variety of non-clinical courses, like industrial/organizational and human factors perspectives, but most specified that students transferring to four-year institutions should have three solid foundational level psychology courses, like a basic or introductory, a developmental, and a biological/research course, instead. The implication of these responses is that students who dabble in specific branches of psychology, like abnormal, social, or personality, alone will only have to repeat these courses for higher level credit and will suffer without a firmer foundational understanding of the discipline.

In what could be categorized "student focus," many responses described the importance of employing solid critical thinking in all areas of student learning. This is reflected in the specific skills of information literacy and analytical thinking cited above, and proposed in a few responses calling for students to take a more scientific approach to answering questions and testing their hypotheses.

Implying particular attitudes needed for university-level classes, many psychology department heads called for community colleges to prepare students more effectively with study skills, in particular, a more scholarly attitude toward studying. The implication expressed here was clearly that we need to require students to make connections within and between the disciplines and to solve problems rather than simply memorizing facts. This appreciation of a deeper level of learning would then translate into a more serious effort to read the literature, master writing and research, and focus more effectively on processing, connecting, and analyzing.

Another specific attitude expressed in the results focused on ethics. The question raised is whether we require students to practice ethical behavior in learning, considering ethics both in their interactions with others and in their understanding of the discipline of psychology. Is the students' focus only on earning certain grades in their classes rather than becoming the practitioners of conscientiousness and empathy at the heart of psychology? This was also expressed as the question of whether our psychology graduates fully understand why they are studying psychology.

The question of understanding the purpose of studying psychology implies more than an interest in the discipline and connects with the literature on the central purposes of higher education. More than half of the responses cited that our community college students transferring to four-year universities need a career focus. Too many students come to a psychology program with no idea of what practicing psychology involves or how to get there.

CONCLUSIONS

Tentative Hypotheses

From the data, I would propose the following tentative hypotheses for further study:

1. Community college students need to improve their writing ability, especially in terms of mechanics, researching, and information literacy.

2. Community college students need to improve their computational skills, especially in the areas of research and statistical analysis.

3. Community college psychology students need to improve their knowledge of research methods, cognition, and perception in addition to their basic understanding of the perspectives and definitions of psychology.

4. Community college students need to improve their critical thinking skills and adopt a more scientific approach to analysis and drawing conclusions.

5. Community college students need to improve their study skills.

6. Community college students need to understand and practice ethical behavior in their targeted disciplines.

Limitations

While the diversity of data collected was informative and challenging, the fact that the number of responses was but 12 emails served as a serious limitation to drawing practical conclusions. It would not be difficult to surmise that other opinions may provide a wider array of potential hypotheses and further insight. The advantage of the phenomenological perspective is the reliance on the experiences and insight of the people who are actually involved in the context being studied, so more responses would give more insight. As mentioned above, also, it is difficult for college instructors to take time to answer questions, especially open-ended ones as were provided in this research. There stands, therefore, the limitation that the answers provided could have been hurried, ill-conceived, or downright deceptive due to individual time constraints or daily mood.

Future Potential Research

This research could and should be replicated with an attempt to secure a wider range of perspectives through another series of emails. Another possible research venture could involve taking the listed answers and expanding them into a checklist that could be evaluated using a more quantitative analysis.

Final Thoughts

From the data collected from these surveys, it is easy to understand the pressures we in higher education feel to make our students' educational experiences useful in helping them become to one day be employed. This is not, however, just limited to covering the basics of knowledge and skills in our disciplines. We must also prepare the whole student to become an ethical, hardworking, critically thinking, problem solving practitioner of our disciplines. We must get beyond teaching facts and provide intellectual exercises leading to mastery not only of the basics but of the mindset to handle life that extends beyond the textbooks. Most importantly, we must heed the challenge laid out before us to prepare our students to understand what our disciplines truly involve, how to prepare to practice those disciplines professionally, and how then to be productive in those careers ethically.

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