

Assisting transition through an Honours College program: an Australian perspective

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The authors present a study wherein 130 students enrolled in the first Australian Honours College successfully made the transition to first-year university studies. High achieving students are provided with a specialised program to ensure smooth transition to university. Student perceptions and performance are evaluated prior to commencement, at the end of first semester and at the end of the academic year enabling changes to be made formatively, with the final evaluation measuring individual student GPA against average GPA for the program of study. Using qualitative and quantitative data, the research finds that the Honours College program provides an effective means of transition to university for high performing students. The study finds that Honours College provides high achieving students with opportunities to excel. Also, that the formative evaluation and structure of Honours College provides a means of enabling successful transition to university studies.

Keywords: Honours College; Transition to university; Formative evaluation; Planned interventions;

Introduction

Many students experience difficulties in the transition to first-year university studies, which is the time when the risk of discontinuing studies is greatest (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). The activities of supportive staff and programs have been shown to enable successful transition, particularly when conducted early in a student's university life (Waters, 2002). Early intervention in the first-year experience, based on student-centred learning (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003), offers educators an opportunity to provide the necessary support to encourage students to remain at university, while enhancing the learning environment. Engendering a climate where first-year students can actively participate in learning may ease the issues involved in transition to university.

This paper presents an approach that is designed to address issues of transition to university through the lens of the first Australian Honours College. The college provides high achieving students with opportunities to excel. From the pre-semester orientation through to final evaluation of performance, by means of analysis of final GPA, students are provided with opportunities not usually available to undergraduate students (e.g. mentoring, leadership

training etc). The impact of Honours College activities is assessed in the context of successful transition to university. Firstly, the extensive retention literature is summarised in the context of the paper. Secondly, Honours College and the intervention involving formative evaluation are discussed. Thirdly, the processes of collecting and analysing quantitative and qualitative data are described and discussed. Finally, the results and implications for educators are presented and discussed.

Literature review

Increasingly students appear to need greater support in their adjustment to academic work and life than has been the case in previous years (Kantanis, 2000). Given an increasing need for support, the initial student experience in higher education is pivotal in establishing attitudes, expectations, motivation and approaches to learning (Kantanis, 2000). Research into the first year student experience provides a critical insight into the wider issues of student engagement, development and retention (Kantanis, 2000). Entering university is a time of great stress for students, including those who are successful (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000; Zitzow, 1984). Some view it as a challenge, others are overwhelmed by the change and do not cope well. As a result high numbers (e.g. up to 40% at some institutions) do not complete, often due to the difference between the expectations of university life and the actual experience (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000, p. 39).

Some students experience transition as “cognitive complexity of expectations and adjustment to university in the first year” which are much harsher and more stressful than expected (Hillman, 2005). As students transition from the support frameworks of schools, they are commonly finding it difficult to manage the level of autonomy and flexibility which comes as part of the higher education environment. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) suggest that the reality of students’ experiences at university is harsher and more stressful than most students expect. The university environment, in particular the difference between university and school, is the main challenge. New found independence also plays a part, with loneliness, home-sickness and difficulties keeping up with academic work being major factors (Tinto, 1988, p. 49). Overall, the research highlights the need for effective facilitation and support from university to assist first-year student transition (Hillman, 2005).

Previous studies have identified that the first year at university as the period in which the greatest amount of academic failure and attrition from study occurs (Hillman, 2005). It has been argued that completion of the first year is ‘more than half the battle’ in progression to degree completion (Tinto, 1988, p. 49). The processes by which young people come to identify with, and become members of, a study community have been likened to those by which individuals progress from youth to full adult status in traditional societies (Hillman, 2005). These processes involves separation, transition and finally incorporation into a new group (Hillman, 2005). It is during these first two stages—separation and transition—that the first year tertiary student may be at greatest risk of failure (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Rickinson & Rutherford, 1995). However, not all student attrition is avoidable, with some students not progressing to incorporation for a variety of reasons (e.g. dislike of group or institution) (Hillman, 2005). Successful integration of first year students occurs at the intersection of students’ social and academic domains, where difficulties in adjusting to one will impact on the other (Hillman, 2005). Social integration and academic performance have both been identified as strong predictors of attrition from study, as has satisfaction with

university life (Hillman, 2005). Information on young people's experiences and perceptions of their first year of tertiary education is therefore of great importance to educators, institutions and the development of lifelong learning (Ramsay, Elphinstone, & Vivekananda, 2003).

Effective transition to tertiary study is also important from the perspective of institutions (Hillman, 2005). High levels of student attrition are a waste of institutional resources, particularly in a climate of limited resources (2000). Unhappy initial experiences for students, together with high levels of attrition, can damage the reputations of individual institutions (Nora, 2001). Many tertiary educational institutions have responded to the separation and transition difficulties faced by first year students by introducing orientation and other support programs (Nora, 2001).

Dornbusch (2000) suggests that all transitions are stressful events. Transition to university is no exception. Further explanation suggests that successful transition implies a breaking away from the student's past community (Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000). The first stage of transition is separation which requires students to disassociate themselves from past memberships, particularly from family and school. Transition requires transformation to some degree. It has also been argued that there are four tactics based on encouragement and support that can assist the transformation process (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Firstly, encouragement from academic staff is essential in engendering student achievement. Secondly, support from significant others can have a major influence on the transition process. Thirdly, the existence of effective support mechanisms or systems during transition is a major influence on student commitment. Finally, effective support systems have a positive influence on students' decisions to remain at university (Hoffman et al., 2002). Students' perceptions of the university environment are formed early and remain stable for some time, and support provided by academic departments early in the process is an important aid to transition (Davig & Spain, 2003).

In addition to encouragement and support, a sense of belonging in students is also important in achieving effective transition to university (Davig & Spain, 2003). Engaging with the values shared by other students, and the university environment, is important. The greater the sense of belonging to the university the more likely it is that the student will remain at university. The experience of personal involvement in a system or environment, so that a person perceives him or herself to be an integral part, is important in achieving a sense of belonging (Davig & Spain, 2003). The first six weeks are critical as this is when students are most likely to experience marginalisation. Managing the university environment is a critical factor in engendering a sense of belonging.

Davig and Spain (2003) argue that orientation has a positive impact on retention. However, there is a lack of consensus over what the most important elements of orientation are. Research suggests that the amounts of physical and emotional energy students exert in the academic experience are important (Ramsay et al., 2003). Social integration is an important factor in integration into university life, as are personal relationships and the encouragement of friends and family (Davig & Spain, 2003). Seminar courses that function as ongoing orientation programs may help. Learning communities are also gaining in popularity. These operate as "a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together" (Danylchuk, 2004). Courses may be connected by a random arrangement of general courses, or may be connected intentionally around an organising theme such as an academic major or

interest. The goal of learning communities is to develop small communities within the larger campus or university community. Spending time together creates a structure that increases the likelihood of interaction. Learning communities enhance the development of social and academic life at university. The perception of being cared about is an important factor as this enhances students ability to deal with the demands of transition to university life (Noble & Childers, 2008).

Despite the growing body of literature in the area, little research attention has been paid to how gifted students deal with transition. Research has focussed on the effects of accelerated learning in high school (Chapman, 2009), early entrance to university (Danylchuk, 2004) and recognising the need for more intensive academic transitioning for gifted students in the first year at university (Noble & Childers, 2008). Despite the lack of research, the importance of learning communities in first-year transition to university has been recognised in the US for many years, with honours colleges being established for this purpose since the late 1950s (Clark, 1965). Honours College is designed to increase the quality of students by recruiting academically gifted students into university programs, with students being exposed to challenging and intense academic experiences with significant positive results (Seifert, Pascarella, Colango, & Assouline, 2007). Universities also use honours college programs as a means of marketing themselves to high achieving students (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995). Honours College provides a positive effect on campus life through the effect of high achieving students on the student mix (Long, 2002). Seifert et al., (2007) also argue the importance of the peer effect of high achieving students as positive role models for other students.

Honours College addresses most of the issues that are important in successful transition to first-year university life. As a learning community it provides encouragement, a sense of belonging, recognises the importance of orientation and has the personal involvement of staff. An additional feature of Honours College is the provision of mentors who play an important part in providing guidance and advice to students (Herbert & McBee, 2007).

Despite the publication of numerous articles over a period of more than 50 years (e.g. Clark, 1965; Cohen, 1966; Shertzer, 1960) there is a lack of strong empirical research dealing with Honours College programs (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). The studies that do exist are mainly descriptive, with little research documenting outcomes. The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the progress of the first cohort of Honours College students enrolled in the first program of its kind in an Australian university, together with the impact of Honours College on first-year student transition to university.

Context of the study

The study involves an investigation of the first cohort of students enrolled in an Honours College program at an Australian University. The program commenced in 2008 and is the first of its kind in Australia. Honours College is designed for outstanding students, providing enriching experiences combined with studies. The intention is to produce graduates with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are in high demand by employers. These include leadership, teamwork, a global perspective and the development of research and industry skills. Students in Griffith University's Honours College program enjoy elective courses specially tailored for high achieving students, one-on-one sessions with mentors, share and collaborate with leading researchers across disciplines and experience a global perspective through

opportunities for overseas study (Smith, 2007). The College is led by a dedicated manager and program coordinator who work with a virtual faculty to oversee its vision and promotion.

Griffith's Honours College commenced with an intake of 130 students. Competition for places was fierce, particularly for the range of scholarships that were on offer, although not all successful students received a scholarship. Induction into Honours College commenced with a two-day intensive orientation where students were introduced to university life with a particular focus on familiarisation with university structures and personnel, academic writing, differences between school and university, group and team work, leadership and general socialising activities. This paper aims to evaluate the success or otherwise of Honours College through formative evaluation using a pragmatic approach with mixed methods (Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Evaluation is conducted at three points during the students first year of undergraduate study: 1) immediately following Honours College orientation; 2) at the end of the first semester of study; and 3) on completion of the first year of study.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection

The first formative evaluation was a quantitative analysis based on student perceptions of important events for students new to university, held before and after orientation. Prior to orientation students listed and ranked issues that they perceived to be important in transition to university. Following orientation students again ranked issues they believed to be important in transition using the list of items previously generated. Identifying changes in perceptions allows students to adjust expectations and priorities for successful transition to university.

The second evaluation utilised qualitative data obtained from interviews with six students at the end of the first semester of first-year university studies. Students were invited to participate by email sent to all Honours College students. Four female students and two male students agreed to participate. Formal, unstructured interviews were conducted in common areas of the university. Obtaining qualitative data at the end of the first semester of study allowed staff to review and change where necessary the way in which Honours College was progressing, using a second-order perspective (i.e. from the perspectives of students themselves).

The final evaluation was a quantitative measure designed to compare the results of the potentially high achieving students enrolled in Honours College with the average of all students undertaking the same programs of study. Grade point average, a university-wide number based measure of performance, was used to compare individual results with the average of all results for each program in which an Honours College student was enrolled. Evaluating overall student performance quantitatively was regarded as an important measure of the success of Honours College.

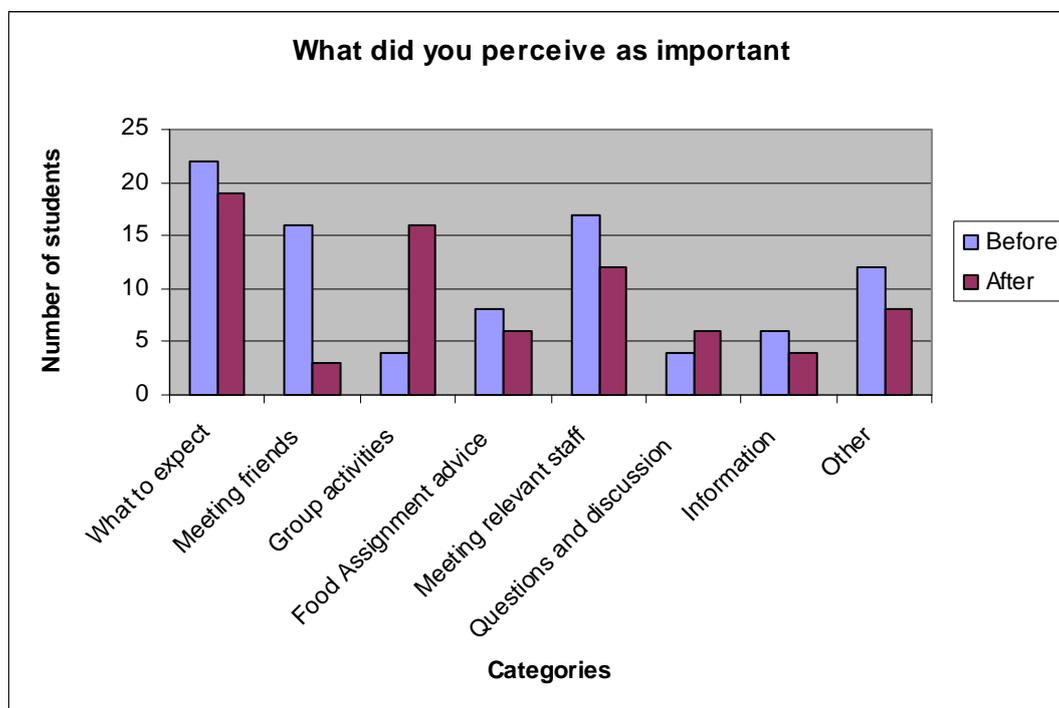
Data analysis

Evaluation at orientation

The first evaluation involved pre and post orientation comparative data. Students were asked firstly to identify and rank what they perceived as important issues for them in transition to

university. Following orientation students again ranked the previously identified issues. The comparative data are shown at Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: Comparative analysis before and after orientation



Data were collected from a group of first-year students (N=99) during a series of pre-semester activities designed to prepare them for university life. Activities included orientation activities, consisting of familiarisation with university structures and personnel, academic writing, differences between school and university, group and team work, leadership and general socialising activities. Students were asked to evaluate their expectations prior to orientation and again after it had been completed. A paired sample T-test ($t(77) = 8.935, p < .001$) indicated that students perceived a significant difference in their preparedness for first-year university on several dimensions following the orientation activities. Students were also asked which of the pre-semester activities were the most valuable in preparing them for university life. Once again, data were collected at the start and at the end of activities. Data collected at the start of activities effectively represent students' expectations of the learning experience ahead. As Figure 1 shows, at the start of activities the most frequent responses were a) knowing what to expect; b) meeting relevant staff; c) making friends; and, other unspecified activities. At the end of activities the most frequent responses were: a) understanding what to expect; b) group activities; c) meeting relevant staff; and d) other unspecified activities. Group activities showed the largest change suggesting that orientation had imparted a greater appreciation of the need to work together to achieve successful transition to university.

Evaluation at the end of first semester

In the final lecture of the first semester students were invited to provide feedback on the effectiveness or otherwise of the Honours College experience in assisting transition to

university. Four male and two female students responded and participated in face-to-face interviews which were audio-recorded and later transcribed into text documents.

The authors conducted thematic analysis of the text documents using *Leximancer* data mining software (Smith, 2004). *Leximancer* is designed to analyse the contents of documents containing text and to display the extracted information visually. Concepts contained within the text are identified in terms of the frequency with which they occur along with their relationship and proximity to other concepts. A number of conceptual categories and associated concepts were identified.

An independent researcher conducted a “manual” analysis of the qualitative responses in order to establish themes in the data, using the method of constant comparison proposed by Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). Thematic analysis using *Leximancer* software and results of the constant comparison analysis were broadly in agreement, with four main themes being identified. Themes identified in qualitative analysis that assisted with transition were designated as: a) global experiences; b) leadership and team building; c) benefits of mentoring; and d) value of the overall experience. The themes are discussed below.

Global experiences - Several students commented that global experiences had assisted and enabled transition to university. Students commented “ I enjoyed the trips to Canberra and Korea” and the benefits of “...access to interchange” indicating a direct link between the global experiences offered by Honours College and transition to university. Other students linked global experiences with mentoring, speaking of “experiences being easier through a mentor”.

Leadership and team building – All students spoke of how effective leadership and team building had been in enabling transition. Students also spoke of how their understanding of university requirements and processes had been assisted by engagement with and acquisition of leadership and team building skills. Students spoke of the benefits to transition in “...the opportunity to do the other experiences” and “I didn’t realise there would be so much emphasis on leadership” and it helped with transition because “Most people just sort of fell into it.” The overall value of team building was reinforced by the enthusiasm of students who while recognising the values of team building still “...need to get together more often to take advantage of the group effect.”

Benefits of mentoring – Students directly identified the benefits of mentoring in the transition process. As discussed above, a formal mentoring program is an integral part of the Honours College program. Comments made by students included “Mentoring is essential in the transition process” and “...has been the best part” and “...access to an exchange, made it easier through a mentor”.

Value of the whole experience – Students interviewed spoke of the overall Honours College experience as an enabler of transition in glowing terms. Comments included references to the excellent organisation of the Honours College program as a means of assisting the transition process. Comments spoke of the “..good organisation” and the “...opportunities to do interesting things”. Students also commented on how Honours College had been a “...positive experience” and how they would “...highly recommend the experience for future high achieving students”

Evaluation at end of first year

At the end of the 2008 academic year each student's performance was formally assessed by the university using a grade point average reflecting overall performance expressed as a number (7.0 maximum). The GPA for each student, together with the average GPA for each program in which students were enrolled, were entered into a spreadsheet prior to analysis. Descriptive statistics are shown at Table 1, below.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis of individual and overall GPA

Variables	Mean	S/D	N
Individual GPA	6.040	1.0008	119
Program GPA	5.099	.6054	119

An independent sample T-test was conducted to test for significant difference between individual student GPA and average GPA for each qualification. Results of the comparison of means showed a significant difference $t(118)=8.827, p<.001$ between the groups. Cohen's measure of effect size, Cohen's d , was calculated based on the descriptive statistics shown at Table 1, resulting in an effect size of 1.138. Cohen has deemed an effect size greater than 0.8 to be large, indicating that the difference between the means of individual Honours College student GPAs and average GPAs for each qualification is both large and significant.

Discussion and conclusion

The study has two main findings: 1) Griffith's Honours College initiative has been very successful and presents a model for other Australian universities to follow. The 130 high achieving students who commenced and completed the 2008 academic year have managed transition effectively and excelled academically, as results of the end-of-year GPA analysis have shown. 2) Initiatives used in the Honours College program (e.g. formal mentoring, global experiences, team building etc) have all been shown to be effective in assisting transition to first-year university studies.

Evaluating the effectiveness of the Honours College program prior to commencement, at the end of first semester and at the end of the academic year enables the program manager to make changes that impact on transition formatively. Formative evaluation provides both corrective and preventive opportunities to influence the transition process. Corrective opportunities allow the program manager to make changes that benefit the current cohort of students in their transition to university (e.g. providing additional leadership training). Preventive opportunities ensure that when changes that enable transition are made they are embedded in future programs.

The Honours College experience provided students with encouragement, a sense of belonging, recognition of the importance of orientation and had the personal involvement of staff. In addition the program provided access to mentors who played an important part in providing experience and advice to students. Qualitative analysis shows that students recognised the

positive impact of Honours College on their successful transition to university. The implications for educators from this study are that the involvement of students, engagement with students, mentoring, engendering leadership and team building are essential ingredients in successful student transition. The challenges are to apply the success of Griffith's Honours College program to the broader university first-year student community.

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