The first year of college is a point of transition for many students, and colleges and universities have a long history of acknowledging the significance of this period in the student experience. Programs to help students make the transition to college were first introduced at Harvard and Johns Hopkins in the late 1800s (Gordon, 1989). Although our approach to working with first-year students has changed since these early orientation programs and first-year seminars, the goal of helping students achieve success in the first college year has remained constant.

I had an opportunity to explore the idea of first-year student success from the perspective of students in their first semester of college. For my dissertation study I interviewed 18 students enrolled in first-year seminars at Clemson University, the University of South Carolina Columbia, and the University of South Carolina Aiken to examine their perceptions concerning the influence of first-year seminar participation on the early college experience. My study was shaped by the experiences I have had with students in orientation programs and first-year seminars, and what I learned through my study has had a profound impact on my work with students.

Through interviews with the students in my study, I was reminded of how similar and yet different the early college experience can be for students. The students told me personal stories of the challenges they had faced just a few months into the first year, and the lessons they learned from these. The struggles and victories the students described illustrated how multifaceted the transition to college is, and helped me see how students' stories can provide context to better understand this complex experience. I have been personally motivated by the students in my study to seek opportunities in both orientation programs and my first-year seminar classes to use what I have learned.

The following are some of the strategies I have incorporated into my work with students in the early college experience.

Create “college knowledge” by helping students understand their responsibilities and opportunities as a learner. David Conley (2008) describes how students first develop college knowledge through the college choice and admissions process. As the students enter the institution, college knowledge becomes the understanding of “how college operates like a system and culture” (p. 10). Part of this understanding involves helping students appreciate and embrace the differences between high school and college. Several of the students in my study mentioned that some of the most significant differences between high school and college involved managing their time and tasks (e.g., homework and assignments), and communicating with faculty and staff. During orientation programs and in first-year seminars there are opportunities to talk to students about some of these basic differences between high school and college involved managing their time and tasks (e.g., homework and assignments), and communicating with faculty and staff. During orientation programs and in first-year seminars there are opportunities to talk to students about some of these basic differences between high school and college, but it is it important to “dig deeper” to allow students to begin to see the connection between skills and behaviors they are learning and the courses they are taking. When I describe general education classes to students during orientation, I now spend time discussing the thinking and reasoning skills many of these classes can help them develop. I have also found that asking students to develop learning goals for their classes can also help students begin to see the many diverse learning opportunities they have both in and out of the classroom.

Provide opportunities for personal reflection and meaning making to occur. First-year students are often looking for answers: where to go to find a resource, or which course to take to fulfill a general education or major requirement. Although orientation programs and first-year seminars often provide answers to these questions, it is also important through these programs to help students develop the skills they will need to solve more complex problems. For example, some of the students in my study described many of the assignments in the first-year seminar classes as “busy work.” When I questioned these students further about the overall course goals and then returned to the topic of the assignments, an “a-ha” moment occurred and they began to see the purpose of the assignments. Baxter Magolda and King (2008) explain the significance these reflective experiences can have in the development of students, yet rather than leading the student to make meaning of something, we often assume that responsibility. Asking students probing or even challenging questions can help them begin to think critically and develop a deeper and more personal understanding. In my first-year seminar classes, I now devote more time debriefing after activities and discussions to encourage personal reflection. Often, written assignments (i.e., journals) help students in the seminar take those reflections and begin to make meaning of particular experiences.
**Share personal stories and experiences to help students feel comfortable and supported.** All of the students in my study described their first-year seminar instructor as someone they could go to for help. Many of them mentioned how the seminar instructors talked about their own experiences in college and shared advice, based on those experiences. Although the instructors in my study had very different backgrounds and amount of experience teaching first-year seminars, they were all successful in making connections with their students. It is obvious that these interactions with the first-year seminar instructors made a difference in the early college experience of the students in the study. Reason, Terenzini, and Domingo (2006) found significant gains in academic confidence by students who felt supported by faculty or staff. Sharing personal stories and experiences can often help instructors develop connections with students, and in turn, can create these perceptions of support. In my first-year seminar classes, I talk about the academic challenges I faced in my own first year of college, and how I was able to overcome those after transferring to another institution and changing my major (four times!). I use my own story to demonstrate how sometimes we have to overcome great challenges and make difficult decisions in our first year.

**Conclusion**

As a practitioner and scholar, I have come to realize how important it is to “close the loop,” which in my case, involved using my experiences to inform my research, and then applying my research findings to my work with first-year students. I encourage other professionals to seek opportunities to learn more about the early college experience, from the perspective of students, and then find ways to apply what they have learned to existing programs and services.

*Stephanie M. Foote, Ph.D., is the winner of NODA’s Norman K. Russell Scholarship for graduate research in 2009.*

**References**


