

Transition to University: An Adjustment and Retention Program for First-Year Students

In an attempt to facilitate the transition to university life for incoming students, most universities now offer support-group interventions in addition to orientation programs. Support groups, in particular, have been found to have positive effects on transitioning students, including reports of decreased depression levels, perceived stress, loneliness, and substance use, and higher social support and retention rates compared to students not involved in support groups (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2005; Pancer, Pratt, & Alisat, 2006).

Recognizing the importance of student support on the successful transition of first-year students to university, Queens University of Charlotte, a comprehensive, private university located in Charlotte, North Carolina, initiated a pilot study in August 2006 of a peer support-group program. The pilot study involved six upper-class cofacilitators and three groups of first-year students ($N = 18$). In August 2007, the program expanded to include 10 cofacilitators and five groups of first-year students ($N = 54$).

To recruit students for the groups, all first-year students were contacted via mail in early August inviting them to participate in an online survey. Those who completed the online survey were then contacted and invited to voluntarily participate in the weekly discussion groups. Cofacilitators were selected from an applicant pool based on their interview and academic performance. New students met weekly, for the first nine weeks of school, in groups with upper-class students to discuss a number of relevant issues related to the transition to university life. The protocol for these meetings was based on The Transition to University (T2U) program developed at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada (Pancer et al., 2006). Session topics included an introduction, new social ties, work and social life balance, peer pressure and personal values, relationship issues, diversity, previous social ties, expectations and reality, and home life and school life.

Meeting times were equally divided into four segments and included (a) a check-in that allowed participants to talk about their previous week, (b) exercises and strategies related to the topic of the week, (c) general discussion about the topic, and (d) evaluation and wrap-up. For the topic of new social ties, for example, the check-in might be "What were the best and worst social events so far?" followed by an exercise on meeting new people at the University (e.g., compiling a list of new acquaintances, sharing with the group the details of one encounter, and then exchanging other socializing strategies). The session concluded with an open discussion about the experience of meeting new people on campus (e.g., Have you ever met someone you didn't really like? How do you deal with that?). Topics were appropriately timed to

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correspond with transitional issues occurring during those early weeks (e.g., scheduling the previous-social-ties topic the week after students return from fall break).

The program also enabled student group facilitators to develop leadership and social facilitation skills such as directing a discussion, maintaining student engagement, and eliciting students' comments. Cofacilitators enrolled in a group dynamics course where the T2U program served as a practicum and learning opportunity.

Assessing the Program

In November 2007, first-year students were asked to complete an online questionnaire assessing variables related to the transition to university life. In addition, T2U participants completed a short weekly survey using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = least; 5 = most) to rate their comfort and enjoyment levels during each segment of the discussion as well as providing any commentary or feedback on their experience. Weekly survey scores were combined and averaged across all participants for each week's meeting. A fairly consistent trend in weekly average evaluation scores indicated a steady increase in enjoyment and comfort as the experience and semester progressed, ranging from 4.34 (Introduction-Week 1) to 4.77 (Home Life and School Life-Week 9). The overall mean across the nine sessions was 4.53.

Anecdotal evidence also supports the positive impact of the program as illustrated by the following comments from a T2U student and a cofacilitator:

Through the first few weeks of T2U, I have learned not only what to do in situations I may find myself in during college, but also I have learned about myself through other people. I didn't have many strategies, but now I do. (T2U student)

This was an incredible experience. I learned that even the students who didn't participate in the discussion very often were genuinely helped by attending group and listening to the experiences of others. (student cofacilitator)

With regards to retention, data from the fall 2007 cohort indicate that 33% more T2U students returned for a second year in the fall 2008 compared to a control group of students who initially expressed an interest in participating in the groups but could not meet during any of the group times ($N = 34$). Additionally, when compared to the entire first-year cohort, the T2U students were also 33% more likely to return for a second year than the non-T2U students ($N = 238$), suggesting this program successfully increased the retention rate among the first-year class.

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Moving Forward

With the support of the administration and backed by the success of the pilot study, the T2U program successfully grew in the fall of 2008 to include 16 cofacilitators who were responsible for leading 11 groups of first-year students ($N = 96$). In January 2009, Queens implemented a new pilot study extending the T2U program into the spring semester. Groups currently meet every two weeks to discuss topics relevant to the spring semester. These session topics include reunion (when students resume classes after winter break); an open-ended discussion on a subject of the group's choice; relationships (around Valentine's Day weekend); spring break plans; procrastination (during mid-terms); looking ahead (during fall registration); and finally, looking back. It is hypothesized that the spring sessions will serve as booster sessions and that students participating in these meetings will report greater overall adjustment and continue to demonstrate higher retention rates compared to non-T2U students and T2U students who only participated in the fall meetings.

At present, Queens is the only U.S. university to conduct the T2U program and collaborates with five Canadian universities, including Wilfrid Laurier University, York University, Memorial University, University of Guelph, and University of Toronto. This collaboration includes ongoing T2U groups at each site, regular phone conferences to review protocol, and multisite data collection and comparisons. When considering the diversity among these universities, including size and race, the continued success at each institution suggests that this program may be easily implemented on a variety of college and university campuses.

HOME

References

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