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“CIRCUMSTANTIALLY VOLATILE”: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE LIVED FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE AT A NEW ENGLAND LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

College-ready, traditional-aged undergraduate students in the United States have been stopping out at an increasingly higher rate over the last forty years. Many students stop out after the first year, which has led researchers to focus on the first-year experience (FYE) as a way of understanding the trend. While the FYE literature, complemented by research in gender theory, the college transition, emerging adulthood, and college student development provide a foundation for considering the problem, there have been very few studies concerning the FYE of white males. Understanding the FYE at a substantive level for this population will lead to further research and hopefully open pathways to increasing retention.

The study at the center of this paper addressed the research question, “How do college-ready, traditional-aged male students experience the first year of postsecondary education at a small liberal arts college in Maine?” Over the course of nine months, from September 2017 to May 2018, participants responded to over forty researcher-generated text messages and engaged in three semi-structured qualitative interviews and one brief survey.

Data were collected, organized through NVivo, and then expressed in narrative form. Analysis was conducted using grounded theory and case study. One participant withdrew from the college; another participant struggled significantly but persisted; and three other participants developed throughout the FYE and entered their second year confident in their ability to succeed. The study suggests that students in transition to college are more likely to persist beyond the first year if they 1) exhibit social resilience; 2) possess a capacity for self-reflection; 3) demonstrate a willingness to reset priorities; and 4) set a tangible goal that extends beyond the first year.

Keywords: first-year experience, college transition, college student development, emerging adulthood, gender, narrative, grounded theory, case study.

INTRODUCTION

Currently, a third of students enrolled in four-year postsecondary institutions in the United States will not graduate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Kahn, et al., 2019). The attrition rate has made student retention a centerpiece of most institutions’ strategic plans. More specifically, there is an issue developing in the postsecondary community surrounding male students’ lack of success. Generating theory from the substantive area of the male first-year college experience (FYE) will be more valid and authentic than attempting to understand the FYE of specifically white, privileged students (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008). My research question therefore focused on male students:

How do college-ready, traditional-aged male students experience the first year of postsecondary education at a small liberal arts college in Maine?

Undergraduate enrollment in the United States increased steadily from the 1970s to 2012 (Renn & Reason, 2013). Female enrollment surpassed male in 1979 and the gap has steadily

increased (Renn & Reason, 2013). Overall undergraduate enrollment in the United States has decreased every year from 2013-2018, perhaps due to lingering effects of the 2008 economic crisis and the high rate of indebtedness awaiting many college students. Slowing population growth has also impacted enrollment; high school enrollment will remain largely flat for the next few years and then gradually decline (Nadworny, 2018). As enrollment declines, retaining students who have already matriculated becomes more urgent for US colleges and universities.

Understanding the FYE is one step on the path toward increasing student retention. Retention allows 1) students to prepare themselves for a more rewarding life after college; 2) institutions to increase funding through tuition and fees; and 3) society to benefit from the skills, talents, and knowledge imparted to students in pursuit of their degrees (Tierney, 1992; Renn & Reason, 2013). There is no single cause or condition that characterizes a student's FYE: not financial resources, not first-generation status, and not social or academic readiness. Rather, there is a matrix of interconnected conditions that create the FYE and influence the decision to persist, transfer, or stop out.

"While the extant literature on college adjustment is extensive, much of it does not focus exclusively on first year students," indicating that "a more comprehensive exploration of college adjustment is warranted" (Kahn, et al., 2019, p. 33). Since 1968, when Perry (1968/1999) offered broad sociological theory based on observation of primarily white, male college students, scholarship has reached out to other populations to determine the quality and character of their experience of postsecondary education. Rightly so, Perry's findings and the findings of similar early studies (Jones & Stewart, 2016) should not be assumed to apply to students who live outside the protection of white male privilege. The last fifty years have yielded a wealth of studies concerning female students; students of color; first-generation students; and low-SES students. Researchers are currently studying at an increasing rate the experiences of LGBTQ, transgender, older, and returning students. However, there has been little specific attention paid to dominant or majority populations such as the traditional-aged, white, male, college-ready first-year population since Perry (Jones & Stewart, 2016). Researchers have noted, however, that many male students arrive on campus with deficits in both academic performance and social capital compared to their female peers (Riegler-Crumb, 2010).

One can reasonably argue that privileged males who stop out in their first year of college have squandered their considerable head start in US society and are personally to blame for their lack of success. The phenomenon begs the question: What reasons lie behind a white, privileged, male student's lack of success, when success has been all but preordained?

The research question looks for such reasons. The question rejects the notion of a monolithic FYE for traditional-aged, college-ready male students. The study's purpose is to contribute to a conversation about male persistence. By starting with the population often considered least vulnerable in US society, the study offers a useful lens through which to view the retention issue.

The study was conducted on the campus of Saint Joseph's College, a private, Catholic, primarily residential, coeducational liberal arts college in Maine. It was founded in 1912 by the Sisters of Mercy and is located on 474 acres on Sebago Lake. The 2017-2018 residential student ratio was 64% female to 36% male out of a total population of 1,533. Tuition in 2017-2018 was \$35,650 and room and board cost \$13,680. The college is accredited through

the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) and runs academic programs in the liberal arts, sciences, education, nursing, and business.

METHODOLOGY

I chose methods that complement each other and did not “adhered slavishly” to the confines of any one of them (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014, p. 9). Narrative methodology, grounded theory, and case study work together to advance an understanding of how the five participants experienced their first year of post-secondary school. Throughout data collection and analysis, I wrote memos documenting my experience of the data as they emerged; questioned the methods I had chosen; rigorously reviewed data as I collected them; formulated trial responses to the research question; processed new reading and research; and acknowledged my biases, assumptions, and ill-formed judgments as they arose (Yin, 2018). The study’s trustworthiness was established through the use of three semi-structured qualitative interviews; a brief survey; and over forty text exchanges with each participant over the course of nine months requesting immediate reflection on events as they occurred; and the repeated and rigorous review of data throughout the data collection period. I used NVivo as a means of collecting, sorting, and organizing data into nodes and themes.

Narrative Method

The key to narrative methodology “is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end” (Merriam, 2009, p. 32). The purpose of narrative inquiry is to make sense of another’s person’s life as lived, creating a new sense of “meaning and significance with respect to the research topic” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). Narrative inquiry is *not* suited for “yield[ing] a set of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). Narrative allows the researcher the opportunity to “restory” data provided by participants, which “is the process of reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework...[and] may consist of...rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 74). By restorying my participants’ FYE, I provide readers with the opportunity to “imagine their own uses and applications” of the theory that emerges from the data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

Grounded Theory

My interpretation of the data was guided by Charmaz (2014) and her method of constructivist grounded theory. A researcher using grounded theory gathers rich data, reviews that data again and again, writes memos to aid analysis and become familiar with the data, and pursues more data when theorizing in order to fill the gaps in the major categories (Charmaz, 2014). The constructivist grounded theorist acknowledges that the act of research influences the participant’s perception of experience and that the researcher actively shapes both data and the analysis of data (Charmaz, 2010, p. 360). At the start of the study, I anticipated that my participants would experience their first year of college as a series of social interactions, exchange of views, and incomplete understandings, as an attempt to redefine themselves within the new context, both socially and academically.

Grounded theory, developed as it is from the data collected and without reference to a set of hypotheses or predictions, “renders quite well the reality of the social interaction and its structural context” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008, p. 32). The theory grounded in the study’s

data contributes to the larger discussion concerning the first-year experience, the transition to college from high school, retention, and gender in undergraduate higher education.

Case Study

The case study method is appropriate when conducting research over time concerning experience within a particular setting, set of conditions, or program (Cresswell, 2013). "Qualitative case study is highly personal research. Persons studied are studied in depth....The quality and utility of the research is not based on its reproducibility but on whether or not the meanings generated, by the researcher or the reader, are valued" (Stake, 1995, p. 135). The participants should be observed in their "ordinary activities and places" (Stake, 1995, p. 134). All case study is subjective, "relying heavily on our previous experience and our sense of worth of things....Our observations cannot help but be interpretive, and our descriptive report is laced with and followed by interpretation" (Stake, 1995, p. 134). I treated each of the participants in my study as a discrete case (i.e. I examined five cases) and compared data to arrive at an understanding of the FYE (RQ 1).

Research Philosophy

As an interpretivist, I see the value in research as contributing to conversation and promoting collaboration (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2008, p. 31) among servant leaders who dedicate their efforts to improving the lives of others. In this study, I interpreted "the interpretations [my participants] give to their own actions and their interactions with others" (Smith, 1993, p. 19). I see "no possibility for abstract and general criteria, at least in any epistemological sense" (p. 20), emerging from the theory my analysis has generated. Generally, I believe that "no epistemic privilege can be attached to any particular research procedure or set of research practices" (p. 44), but that instead research practices invite interpretation that describes a particular set of experiences observed in a particular setting with particular participants (Maxwell, 2013). Theory can be messy and not universally applicable and still contribute significantly to the conversation about improving lives and the human experience (Risman, 2004).

The value of conducting case study research in grounded theory is that action to improve the lives of others flows from careful consideration of the "object" under study, not from cursory observation of surface-level characteristics. Grounded theory allows the researcher to "understand[] the ways reality is socially constructed" (Schram, 2006, p. 104). The rigorous data review of grounded theory paired with the keen eye required by case study yields thick data that root interpretation in experience. The theory that emerges does not claim to be universal, but instead proposes a new set of tools to be employed in the effort to assist first-year college students in their transition out of high school.

RESULTS

The study featured five participants, each with a pseudonym of his own choosing: Chad Brunswick, Kurt Nolan, Gary Anderson, Michael Brown, and Scott Combs. The participants engaged in the study at a regular, consistent rate throughout their first year of college. The data's specificity and timeliness create thick description that provides a complex and nuanced image of each participant's FYE. Reading the data reveals clear differences, and many similarities, in the participants' FYEs. There are moments in each participant's narrative that

enact the transition from high school to college, from home to a new setting, and from one self-perception to another.

In keeping with the rigor of grounded theory, data analysis consisted of multiple reviews over time of each participant's responses to questions in the interviews, the survey, and the texts. Once the themes emerged through my use of NVivo, I re-evaluated the data by creating narrative profiles to provide the depth and breadth necessary to see patterns within each participant's FYE and across the five cases. Several topics emerged from the last level of data analysis, including shifts in participants' self-perceptions; identity formation and development; the degree to which each participant associated his performance with his masculine identity; the shift from assimilation to accommodation, at different levels of accomplishment for each participant; and the role of socio-emotional skills or growth in transitioning to college. Each of these topics contributed to the formulation of a theory of the FYE.

The narratives reveal a number of epiphanies for the participants. Chad, the student who struggled significantly in his first year but persisted, realized near the end of his FYE that he had chosen friends because they played baseball with him, and recognized through deep self-reflection that he was ready for a different group of friends based on other interests. Kurt, who is neuro-atypical, learned that he was more socially adept than he had ever thought possible—he surprised himself by forming social bonds soon after arriving at college, assisted by his dorm's milkshake-making activity. Gary discovered through a religion course that even though he did not have a close personal connection to faith, he believed it was necessary as an adult to learn about and respect the faiths of others. Michael admitted mid-year that his academic skills from high school were not sufficient for success in college, and then addressed the problem by seeking help in the tutoring center. Finally, Scott did not recenter (Tanner, 2006) to any significant degree, but instead continued to imagine himself at home with his family and his friends. However, Scott determined that he had "a different lifestyle than anyone else" at Saint Joseph's, a lifestyle that prioritized work and home over college success. His realization demonstrated a significant change in his attitude toward college, from boisterous optimism at the start of the year to quiet resignation by the end.

Three of the participants defined their experience in part with reference to their masculine identity. There is a need for research on masculinity, not the "accomplishments" of cultures commonly attributed to men, but on how masculinity affects the lives of average, everyday men (Kimmell, 2011, pp. 6-7; Jones & McEwan, 2000). Chad viewed his first year through the lens of baseball and his athletic prowess, his ability to exceed expectations in the coach's eyes and to surpass the performance of older students. The most significant event in his first semester "was getting personal bests in the baseball workouts." In contrast, Michael was frustrated by his lack of playing time in both basketball and baseball. Unlike Chad, who saw success as a first-year player as validation for his time at SJC, Michael projected his performance into his third year, when he imagined that he would contribute more significantly because he had grown more skillful and older players had graduated. Michael was engaged in the process of identity consolidation by envisioning himself at a future time in the life span. His capacity for persistence and setting a long-term goal also distinguishes Michael from Scott, who identified himself closely with other elements of masculinity (e.g. providing for a girlfriend and protecting his mother and grandmother) but did not set clear goals to guide his behavior. Scott was not ready to engage in identity consolidation, unlike

Michael, because Scott's vision of his future remained radically unstable. Scott was unable to devise a plan for his future that persisted more than a few months.

After repeated review of the data and the narratives created from them, I theorized that there are particular tools that four of my participants used to persist: social resilience; a capacity for self-reflection; a willingness to reset priorities; and a persistent goal that extends beyond the FYE. Scott's FYE provides another lens through which to view this theory: his lack of a clear vision of what constitutes "success" in the FYE had the greatest impact on his decision to withdraw completely from the residential college experience. A vision of success is linked to identity formation, characterized by the ability to assimilate and then accommodate new experiences and perceptions into a personal value system and a set of vocational goals, and the sense of security necessary to work through challenges.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on my review of the literature and analysis of the study's data, I concluded that emerging adult identity forms as the individual encounters new experiences. Growth results from these encounters, although for some individuals, past experiences and associations provide a bulwark against true change. The ability to assimilate new experiences and react in positive ways to a change in conditions (whether physical, mental, intellectual, socioemotional, or spiritual) depends for its efficacy on the level of security the individual feels. Security can be defined short of self-actualization but includes the sense that the self (as perceived at the moment) will survive new encounters.

Development occurs when individuals take a new experience and fit it to their current perception of the self. This process is connected to the level of an individual's socio-emotional skills. If the experience allows the individual to retain security, then the individual assimilates the experience and alters (usually slightly, sometimes significantly) self-perception. Shutting down avenues to particular kinds of experiences reflects a fear that the self will be altered in irreversible and negative ways. By the end of his FYE, Scott did not achieve the level of self-management necessary to feel secure away from home and at SJC. He did not reflect deeply enough on his experience to reach the level of self-awareness that would have enabled him to define "success" for himself, and therefore he did not greet new experiences as opportunities to achieve success. Chad's FYE was also characterized by instability and a lack of focus, but he entered SJC with the clear definition of success as performing well on the baseball team and, by extension, working hard enough in his classes so he could earn high enough grades to proceed to his second year.

Implications and Recommendations

The five traditional-aged, college-ready, male students who shared their first-year experience with me in such detail and with such openness helped me see patterns in the kaleidoscope. The transition to college was eased for the young men who demonstrated social resilience, reflected thoughtfully on who they were becoming, reconsidered their priorities as they encountered new demands on their time and energy, and set goals that extended beyond the FYE and defined future success. The theory has implications for campus organizations seeking to provide interventions during the FY in order to increase retention.

At Saint Joseph's College, specific organizations have an opportunity to put theory into practice to benefit students. The counseling center can explore creating literature and

presentations that help all students (but with a focus on first-years) recognize the significance of self-reflection and social resilience in forming new connections and recentering on campus. Campus Life is ideally suited to supporting students in setting goals that extend beyond final exams and passing classes. The library can reach out to first-year students to support their efforts to connect fields of study to fulfilling lives outside the classroom. The library's work will help students set goals, reflect on their priorities, and make connections to peers and staff.

When I asked how my participants were feeling at the start of second semester (January 2018), Kurt replied that he felt "circumstantially volatile." He went on to explain that he was having trouble with his girlfriend; he was anxious about playing hockey; he didn't know what to expect from his new set of professors; and he didn't know if the friends he had made first semester would continue to be his friends when everyone returned to campus. It became clear to me, reviewing the data again in preparation for elucidating a theory, that first-year students who struggle with identifying who they are and who they can become through the college experience are the true beneficiaries of research in the FYE. Students who receive support in the four areas addressed by the theory may find the transition more manageable and therefore persist to a second year and hopefully through to graduation.

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