



College 101: Strategies for First Year Success – A Program for High School Seniors

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Abstract: Making the transition from high school to college can be one of the biggest challenges in life. The first year dropout rate stands at 26% nationally. Adolescent decision-making literature suggests that youths can achieve greater success and reduce negative consequences during their first year of college if they 1) increase knowledge of new social scene and academic protocols, and 2) work through a conjectural decision-making process prior to actual encounters.

This program presents key points high school seniors “must know” in advance of their arrival on campus. It is research-based with first-hand advice from real college students including on-the-street video interviews. Topics cover: Choosing Classes, Test Strategies, Social Scene Changes, Budgeting, Roommates, Safety, Talking with Professors, Time Management, and more. The program is designed for any student planning to attend any 2 or 4-year college. Youth professionals can teach this loosely-scripted 1 or 2-hour PowerPoint-based seminar “out of the box.” The \$159 curriculum package is free to the first 250 responders.

Background

Each year, approximately 1.8 million U.S. first-quarter college freshmen encounter the greatest decision-making period of their young lives. Many of their choices will initiate life-long consequences with financial, emotional and physical (health-related) implications. The highest risks include a dramatic loss of earning capacity due to failing or dropping out—26% freshman non-return rate nationally (ACT, 2004), acquiring a sexually transmitted infection—25% of college age youths (CDC, 2004), alcohol poisoning, acquaintance rape, and others.

Conversely, behavioral data on youths show improved decision-making and fewer negative consequences associated with prior encounters or foreknowledge of given life scenarios (Trad, 1993; Wyatt, 1989). Thus, our hypothesis: *Youths will achieve greater success and reduce negative consequences during their first year college if they*

- 1) *increase knowledge of social scene changes and new academic protocols, and*
- 2) *work through a conjectural decision-making process prior to life encounters.*

Increased College Prep Efforts

In recent years, colleges and universities have added “First Year Encounter” seminars aimed at easing social and academic adjustments while lessening dropout potential. Most, however, offer these during the first quarter—too late to provide processing time for risk decision-making. Freshman orientation is offered prior to campus arrival, but tends to focus on class scheduling, placement, library use, and some warnings about crime prevention and underage drinking. In addition, it is predisposed toward a specific institution.

High school guidance counselors work to prepare students for college entry exams, scholarships and financial aid applications. But, they have little time for discussions on social scene changes, campus life, or collegiate academic rigor. The popular press offers several “college survival” titles as antecedents; but reviews are anecdotal and mixed, at best.

The new College 101 curriculum offering stands apart on two key points. First, it is research-based. Second, it is proffered several months prior to the physical move—the transition-to-college event. Again, adolescent decision-making theories note the predictive abilities of intervention to influence actual decisions that can forecast outcomes (Mann, Harmoni, & Power, 1991; Ross, 1981). This previewing technique forms the basic premise of the program.

The Program’s Research Basis

We surveyed over 600 current college students (Ohio State University IRB Protocol #2006E0643) asking them to provide advice to college-bound high school seniors. Over 280 provided input (Raison, 2006). Key themes were identified and formed the basis of a 2006 pilot college preparatory curriculum. To date, an estimated 3,500 students in 14 states have participated in the seminar. Of 708 collected evaluations, 88.6% of students said they learned new information and/or that they would recommend the program to a friend.

In late 2006, the University of Wisconsin Research Foundation’s Transitions to College Focus Group Study found that many college students wish they had known in high school how much more demanding college would be. They also said that college stress would have been reduced if they had taken more courses to prepare them for college. (Janke, et al, 2006).

The report recommended *"developing workshops for parents and their college-bound students to discuss the social transformations that are coming."* They also recommended using current college students *"to share their experiences and advice with high school seniors as way to increase their knowledge about academic, social, and financial issues related to the transition to college."* The College 101 program directly addresses these recommendations.

The program was built on the framework of Logic Model (University of Wisconsin Extension, 2002). It provided consideration for the context, environment, and input-output factors that described the full chain of events—from inputs to outcomes—and provided accountability at the end of the process. This strengthened the program overall and provided an excellent structure to convey the current collegian advice.

Program Overview

The College 101 curriculum offers guidance on key issues derived from current collegians that lend stories with peer-to-peer credibility. It approaches high school seniors on their terms utilizing direct quotes from contemporaries to add social scene and classroom stories with "future shock" value. For the 2007 update, we taped "on the street" video interviews with just over 60 college students from three different universities. Now, sixteen edited segments intersperse "live advice" throughout the program.

During the seminar, specific differences between high school and college academic protocols are highlighted. Data on college completion rates are presented as well to show evidence of the difficulty of this endeavor and to invoke a challenge to succeed. Participants receive tips on specific topics such as time management, studying/testing techniques, roommate issues, drug, alcohol, and STD statistics, credit/money management, and more. Questions are posed at given intervals to stimulate discussion and to increase audience participation and engagement.

Program Impact

Most participants will depart for college within one or two months of completing the program. Move-in day provides the first opportunity to determine program effectiveness. As parents unload cars, unpack boxes and finally depart for home, the complete and total freedom of being away at college will be suddenly realized. If not that very evening, then certainly within the week, first-quarter freshmen will encounter between one and all of the scenarios presented in the program. Their decision-making process will be taxed to the fullest extent. Hopefully, information from the seminar will resonate and help guide their choices.

Making a successful transition is the main goal. The definition of success, particularly within this construct, is expanded to encompass the avoidance of certain behaviors with potentially negative, life-impacting consequences, especially during this first quarter adjustment period. We are now gathering participants' future college email addresses to conduct follow-up surveys during their first quarter of college to determine if and how the program components were recalled, and/or if their decisions were influenced in a positive way. This information will help guide derivative editions of the program.

Teaching the Program

All materials needed to facilitate this program are on one CD. It can be conducted by: University outreach specialists, 4-H & Extension Educators, Youth Development Professionals, School

Counselors, Teachers, Community and Faith-Based Organization Professionals. The CD is formatted to teach the program as a:

- 1. Stand-alone seminar:** The CD includes both 1-hour and 2-hour versions. Audience Size: 10 to 100 (or 200+ but with less interaction).
- 2. Classroom series:** The CD includes a classroom version with 4-6 lessons of 1-hour each, and additional handouts and discussion points. Audience Size: 5 to 50 optimal.
- 3. Self-study:** This included a new "electronic narrator" as a click-through-guide for student/parent or student/teacher study. Program length is self-determined.

Current collegians may provide highlights and beneficial insight in any teaching application. Educators may wish to preview the program with them; then develop a plan of inclusion with time and topic restrictions. The program CD includes Microsoft's free PowerPoint *Viewer*. System requirements include Windows 98, XP or newer and most Macintosh operating systems.

Implementing the Program (250 Free)

The retail price of the curriculum is \$159 for end-users schools, libraries, or non-profits. An expanded use site-license is available for broad-ranging or state-wide applications. **The first 250 Extension Educators (or Journal of Youth Development readers) who respond will receive the program FREE.** A \$5/unit shipping and handling fee will be collected. Simply email the author.

Recipients of the free copies will be asked to either teach the seminar or share information about the program with their local high schools. Some schools, guidance counselors and local libraries may want to have their own copies for student self-study and review. They may also want to teach the expanded 4-lesson classroom series (included on the CD) as a special senior session or in a government class. School purchase information is available online at <http://college101seminars.com>.

For schools with limited or no curriculum budget, the program will be made available to them free of charge. An application is required and a limit may apply.

Cost Recovery

Some schools have opted to charge a fee for the class, (e.g. \$2-\$5 per senior). This modest expense can help promote buy-in from the participating seniors and can provide a supplement to a curriculum budget year after year.

Expanded Program Use – Admissions Tool

To date, three universities have expressed interest in customizing the program with their logos, branding, and college-specific information. The program would be sent as a self-study to help prepare *admitted students*. It would offer a wider array of topics and depth than is afforded during the brief on-campus freshman orientation. It would also provide critical processing time for students prior to their fall campus arrival. A low cost site license for First-Year Experience and Admission Office use is available.

Conclusions

Feedback on the research, program content and participant reaction has been overwhelmingly positive. Based on written responses of participants and high interest by school counselors, the program appears to have great potential for impacting the lives of college-bound students. The current college student survey returned more than 1,000 comments citing the need for an intervention program such as this. These excerpts are typical responses:

"I wish I was more confident as a freshman."

"I wasn't prepared to be in control."

"A lot of people aren't ready for college."

The College 101 program combines common threads of readily accessible information into one seminar that is proffered at a critical point in adolescent development. It contributes essential knowledge that will help reduce negative consequences and dropout rates of first-year college freshmen.

Curriculum Highlights

The curriculum has undergone numerous blind peer reviews among colleagues in universities across the country. It has received several honors and invitations noted below.

Awards:

1st Place: National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4HA) – National Winner of the 2007 Educational Program Package Prize. Presentation: October 25, 2007, Atlanta, Georgia.

Invited Presentations:

- Children, Youth & Families at Risk (CYFAR) Annual Conference. Chicago, Illinois - May 1-4, 2007. (Program workshop on methodology / peer inclusion using College 101 model.)

- National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals (NACDEP) Annual Conference. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania - April 16-19, 2007. (Complete curriculum.)

- Building Human & Social Capital: The Knowledge Economy Conference – Ohio State University. Columbus, Ohio – May 2, 2006. (White paper.)

- National Association of Extension 4-H Agents (NAE4HA) Conference. Seattle, Washington – October 30 - November 3, 2005. (Pilot curriculum.)

Reviews / Comments:

"The transition from high school to college can be the most difficult transition in life. But it doesn't have to be. College 101 gives students exactly what they need: a realistic picture of what's ahead, combined with practical tools to navigate the challenges."— Derek Melleby, College Transition Specialist, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (<http://www.cpyu.org>)

"The difficulty of making the transition from high school senior to college freshman is well documented. Along with the first year dropout rate, students face enormous social and academic pressures. Built on a sound research base, the College 101 program provides excellent advice gathered directly from the front line: current college students. The video segments bring great credibility in a peer-to-peer learning model that really connects with

college-bound students.”— Theresa Ferrari, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Extension Specialist, The Ohio State University.

"It is yet another great tool for school counselors to use as they help students successfully plan for their futures."— Kelley S. Schubert, MS, LPSC, President, Ohio School Counselor Association

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