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Transitions to Higher Education

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Around the globe, the transition into higher education is a critical point in development as individuals experience change in a multitude of areas, including their environment, relationships, responsibilities, roles, and identity. To further complicate the transition, it typically coincides with the developmental progression from late adolescence to emerging adulthood. Thus, students are not only navigating changes that are directly related to their new academic and social environment, but also managing changes in their identity and worldview. Progressing into higher education and adulthood brings great discontinuity, and how youth adjust to such changes affects whether they flourish or flounder.

The entry reviews the transition to higher education in several domains. Contextually, students move away from secondary school to a new learning, and often living, environment. Developmentally, youth typically enter higher education as they transition into emerging adulthood, the stage between the ages of 18 and 25 wherein individuals identify as neither adolescents nor adults (Arnett, 2000). Identities shift as youth grapple with what it means to become an adult, and oftentimes face questions about ethnic and sexual identities. Socially, youth experience disruptions in existing relationships while navigating new ones with peers, faculty, and staff. Financially, enrolling and persisting in higher education can bring about debt and increased work responsibilities. Psychologically, transitioning to higher education is challenging but it also can be an opportunity for flourishing. The entry concludes with a discussion of higher education programs and services, which have great potential for promoting positive growth during this key life transition.

1 Contextual Transition: Beyond Secondary Schooling

Upon completion of secondary schooling, youth face an array of options, including enrolling in a 2- or 4-year educational or vocational program, joining the workforce, or taking a gap year. Worldwide, rates of higher education enrollment are climbing, though great disparities remain between world regions (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). China, India, Russia, and the United States together account for 45% of higher education enrollment globally, with the greatest growth in enrollment occurring in China and India (British Council, 2012). In the United States, approximately 70% of high school graduates begin a higher education program the following year, with students split equally

between 2- and 4-year programs (Kena et al., 2016). Additional countries with significant numbers of tertiary students include Brazil (6.2 million), Indonesia (4.9 million), Iran (3.4 million), South Korea (3.3 million), and Turkey (3.0 million; British Council, 2012).

Those who pursue a trade that does not require additional schooling, or who have other mitigating circumstances, may decide to discontinue their education after secondary school and join the work force or face unemployment (see TRANSITIONS INTO EMPLOYMENT; YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT). It has also become increasingly common for recent secondary schooling graduates to take a *gap year*, during which to gain work or service experience prior to beginning a higher education program. Thus, there is not a singular, normative path after secondary school, especially since individuals have access to an increasing number of postgraduation options. However, despite such options, enrollment in higher education programs has continued to grow globally.

Compared to secondary school, higher education students face a decline in institutional structure and support. Possibly for the first time, students must manage their own class attendance, assignment completion, and study time without the supervision of parents or teachers. Those who struggled academically in secondary school may continue to have difficulties as a result of the unstructured schedule and their underdeveloped academic skills, whereas those who excelled previously may also now struggle as formerly successful academic habits may no longer be effective in the competitive university environment. Generally, students are exposed to new academic expectations and learning styles in higher education, and must be more proactive in reaching out for academic support. Notably, the number of internationally mobile students, or those choosing to attend higher education in other countries, has continued to grow recently (British Council, 2012), and so the decline in institutional structure and support inherent in higher education is likely to be compounded for students attending higher education abroad.

2 Developmental Transition: Into Emerging Adulthood

The transition to higher education typically coincides with the developmental transition from late adolescence to emerging adulthood. Jeffrey Arnett first described this developmental stage in 2000, when he observed that emerging adults are tasked with exploring and developing their identity in terms of romance, work, and overall worldviews, in addition to navigating instability, especially in terms of residential changes. Although emerging adulthood confers a certain degree of instability and stress, it is generally a time characterized by flourishing. Success in achieving tasks of emerging adulthood is associated with maintaining well-being generally, as well as during times of transition. A large longitudinal study of those aged 18 to 25 in the United States found that, overall, well-being increased for the first years following high school graduation regardless of postschool activities (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004).

Since many of the aforementioned areas of growth and change naturally occur as youth transition into higher education, college may serve to enhance individual development. College represents a unique time, when emerging adults are temporarily free from impeding adult responsibilities, such as raising a family or gaining full-time employment, and therefore have time to achieve developmental milestones. Further, attending higher education exposes individuals to more diverse ideas and individuals,

which can promote both intellectual and personal growth. For many, the environmental shift from home to a university setting allows for more independent living, with students planning their daily schedules, completing chores like laundry and cleaning, and managing their own activities of daily living. Thus, the new environment of tertiary schooling may provide fertile ground for successfully attaining the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood.

Despite the potential benefits, emerging adulthood can be a time of increasing stress as well. The lack of a structure in higher education, with large blocks of free time between classes and freedom from parental supervision, can foster distress and delays in completing developmental tasks. A review of international research conducted by scholars in the United Kingdom indicated that increases in responsibility during emerging adulthood may be compounded by the university context, where students face new demands in academics, finances, and independent decision making (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006). For example, since many European universities are located in cities, students may decide to live in city apartments instead of university-owned housing, which can bring a greater degree of independence and thus stress. Ultimately, the inherent difficulties of the transition can be exacerbated by other emerging adulthood tasks that students are navigating simultaneously. However, students who begin tertiary school at a slightly older age as a result of their circumstances or their country's education system structure (e.g., Israeli students are required to serve in the army for at least 2 years prior to attending tertiary school) face similar challenges and stressors during the transition.

3 Identity Transition: Adulthood, Ethnicity, and Sexuality

While the identities of emerging adults naturally strengthen with time, the university environment offers a unique opportunity to develop a sense of adulthood. In the past, achieving an adult identity was marked by external experiences, such as becoming employed full time or getting married. However, extensions in education have delayed such milestones, and adulthood today is associated with broader feelings of responsibility and independence. A meta-analysis that included higher education student samples from different countries found that students' identity and sense of adulthood expand with exposure to unfamiliar and diverse ideas and individuals (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Engaging in identity exploration and solidification is critical for well-being and positive adjustment, both developmentally and academically. Students who demonstrate identity commitment or synthesis in the first year of higher education are more likely to report improved mental health, higher levels of self-esteem, and lower levels of anxiety (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013).

One's identity may be molded by a variety of factors, such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Differing demographically from the majority of students at one's institution, which varies across countries and types of program, can bring unique challenges and stressors to an already difficult transition. As with adult identity, exploration and commitment are the primary processes by which individuals develop their ethnic identities (Phinney, 1990); however, despite some common elements, the processes differ between specific ethnicities and social contexts. Transitioning into higher education typically places students in environments of greater diversity, which can increase the salience of their own ethnicities and cultural backgrounds.

Students can engage in ethnic exploration by taking ethnic studies or courses in their native language or by becoming involved in cultural activities and groups both on and off campus. Having a more defined ethnic identity in college has been linked to both positive and negative outcomes, such as a greater sense of closeness to one's ethnic group, more positive adjustment, and better academic performance, as well as a greater sensitivity to prejudice and discrimination. Other relational factors such as social support, familial attachment, and social integration on campus have also been associated with more successful transitions to and better performances during higher education for ethnic-minority students.

Additionally, sexual identity plays an important role during emerging adulthood and college. Although patterns of sexual attraction are generally established by emerging adulthood, sexual identity continues to develop through this stage. An extensive review of sexual orientation and identity development conducted by Elizabeth Morgan in 2013 found that, while all individuals undergo the same sexual identity milestones and in the same order, there is more variability in the timing of each milestone for nonheterosexual individuals compared to heterosexual individuals. For some, college affords a more open, accepting environment where students feel more comfortable exploring their sexual identity and interacting with other sexual-minority students. However, navigating sexual identity can further complicate the typical stressors of university as students may experience isolation, prejudice, and mistreatment because of their sexual identity, particularly in countries or institutions that are more socially conservative. Overall, compared to heterosexual students, sexual minority students are more vulnerable to mental health difficulties (e.g., anxiety and depression), experience greater cognitive–affective vulnerabilities (e.g., negative thoughts, suppression, and avoidant coping), have mixed perceptions of faculty support, and report lower levels of social well-being during the first year of tertiary schooling. Institutions can improve the campus climate for sexual-minority students by adding a greater focus on LGBTQ issues to curricula, challenging heteronormative readings and lectures, providing resources and programs related to LGBTQ issues, and creating safe spaces that promote acceptance.

4 Relationship Transitions: Family, Peers, Faculty, and Staff

The transition to higher education involves a significant shift in relationships, as many students move out of their family home and reside on or near campus—and even those who commute encounter a new social landscape of peers, faculty, and staff. Whether they live on campus or commute, students naturally become exposed to a large number of unfamiliar people who may differ from them in terms of culture, lifestyle, and values. While being stretched beyond their comfort zone is important for growth, it is also crucial for students to find some basis of similarity and connection with others on campus. Feelings of connection and belonging on campus predict well-being, a more successful transition process, better academic functioning, and better retention. Many students who withdraw during their first year do so because they did not feel integrated on campus. To facilitate feelings of connection, students commonly join smaller communities with shared interests or values, such as athletic teams or clubs.

Although individuation from parents is a hallmark of emerging adulthood and is further facilitated by students' move to campus, the family of origin continues to play

an important role in the transition to college. Students' relationships with their parents commonly improve when they graduate from secondary school, and parental support is a critical resource for students as they manage new obstacles and stress. Positive relations to family are linked to psychological well-being, academic functioning, and social adjustment during the first year of college. Thus, although the stage of emerging adulthood and the college context both contribute to greater levels of autonomy, support from family remains important in maintaining student well-being.

Further, peer relationships become increasingly important in adolescence, and this continues as emerging adults enroll in higher education programs where they spend the majority of their time with peers. As in adolescence, peers remain the primary comparative group, and students' peer and friend networks expand immensely as they transition to tertiary programs. Regardless of whether students move away from home to attend school, graduating from secondary school contributes to shifts in, or the dissolution of, many friendships. Students who are preoccupied with their prior friendships have worse adjustment to college, which highlights the importance of establishing new connections. Developing peer relationships and strengthening social affiliation during this time is critical to adjustment and well-being during the first year, and can even protect against the development or exacerbation of psychiatric symptoms. However, many first-year students report difficulties in developing social connections on campus, which has been linked to feelings of loneliness, confusion, and depression. Additionally, while the development of peer relationships in college is vital for a successful transition and the cultivation of well-being, there can be negative consequences from these connections as well. Perhaps the largest concern is the effect of peer influence on risky behavior. Higher education is a time when different variables converge, such as relative freedom from adult supervision, underdevelopment of brain regions responsible for judgment, and perceived pressure to fit into the social norms, all of which can cause students to be more vulnerable to risky behaviors. Across countries, peer influence and social norms in the context of higher education have been linked to excessive alcohol consumption, drug use, sexual behavior, and risky decision making generally.

Finally, as students separate from home and their immediate families, staff and faculty on campuses assume a role of *in loco parentis*, serving "in the place of a parent." Developing positive relationships with professors supports both short- and long-term positive outcomes. Research from North American samples shows that it is common for students to seek the aid of professors in order to cope with the stressors of higher education, and that students with positive faculty connections experience greater academic success. Further, in the long term, adults who recall having at least one positive relationship with a professor are twice as likely to have greater reported well-being after graduation and engagement at work compared to adults who do not. However, establishing such relations with professors may be more difficult at larger universities that have higher student–faculty ratios. An extensive review of the impact that various forms of social support have on transitions during emerging adulthood was conducted by Joel Lane (2015). Ultimately, social support, regardless of the source, is protective during a time that can otherwise be stressful for students (Azmitia et al., 2013).

5 Financial Transition: Challenges and Concerns

The financial considerations of attending higher education vary considerably worldwide, as evidenced by a 2017 study that reported the average annual tuition of 35 countries, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017). In many European countries (e.g., Finland, Germany, Turkey, Slovakia, Scotland) tuition at public universities is free for European students, who are expected to cover only ancillary costs such as living expenses or administration fees. Non-European students or those taking classes in English pay between \$1,500 and \$19,000 annually for the same institutions (OECD, 2017). A number of other countries such as Austria, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, Portugal, and Spain have yearly tuition fees lower than \$2,000. Countries with institutions costing an average of \$3,000 to \$5,000 per year include Canada, Australia, Israel, Korea, and New Zealand, followed by Chile and Japan which range from \$5,000 to \$8,000 (OECD, 2017). The United States has the most expensive average annual tuition fees—as of 2015, attending a 4-year higher education program, including tuition, room, board, and fees, cost approximately \$16,000 for public institutions and \$42,000 for private nonprofit institutions. Further, in an anomaly from the European tradition, the United Kingdom has comparable costs with the United States. Thus, while many European students are not constrained by financial considerations, students from other countries may be limited in where they apply for financial reasons; once they are enrolled, students continue to face a financial burden.

Although the expense is a significant deterrent for many students of lower socioeconomic status, receiving financial aid can reduce this burden and increase the likelihood of both attending and staying in tertiary programs. Within the United States, the number of full-time students at 2- and 4-year institutions receiving financial aid continues to increase, reaching 79% and 86% respectively for the 2014–2015 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). However, not all scholarships or financial supports span the entirety of students' education, and changes in financial aid, as well as the requirements for maintaining that aid (e.g., minimum grade point average), can cause significant stress. The fear of incurring debt is a global barrier to enrollment for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Altbach et al., 2009), and taking out government loans can lead to feelings of stress and financial burden, particularly in the latter years of college. Despite the general increases in financial assistance, growth in higher education enrollment has been limited to middle- to upper-socioeconomic classes in almost all countries (Altbach et al., 2009).

Additionally, students may choose to find part-time employment or to participate in work–study programs, which ensure that money earned through an approved part-time job is applied directly toward education expenses. Of note, much of the research on employment during higher education focuses on the United States. Although the percentage of American students employed during college declined from 2005 to 2015, part-time students are more likely than full-time students to be employed (78% vs. 43%, respectively) and tend to work more hours (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Holding full-time employment can serve as a risk factor for dropping out of school since it may detract from time spent studying, meeting with faculty, or becoming involved on campus, and can cause stress as students attempt to balance school and work responsibilities. However, holding part-time employment during college does not have the same negative impact on academic outcomes, perhaps because of students'

discipline, motivation, and organization. In sum, while financial considerations can strain the transition, financial supports have been linked to both increased enrollment and improved retention.

6 Psychological Transition: Opportunities for Success Versus Struggle

There are a multitude of overlapping factors, including developmental, social, financial, cultural, and other variables not reviewed in this entry (see also *TRANSITIONS INTO EMPLOYMENT*), that may influence whether students flourish or flounder in the transition to higher education. Attending tertiary programs presents an opportunity for change, and there is great heterogeneity in the ways in which students respond to the transition. Cross-cultural samples have found that, for those who faced adversity in childhood or adolescence, the transition can offer a positive new start with dramatic changes in relationships, professional goals, and environment. Further, various psychological and individual factors have been linked to university adjustment and success. For example, hardiness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem are predictive of first-year adjustment across several domains. Higher levels of hope in the first year positively predict grade point average and retention 4 years later, and self-compassion can reduce homesickness and depression, bolster college satisfaction, and help students endure the stressors of college. Therefore, there appears to be a bidirectional relation between college experiences and psychological well-being.

While some students may flourish in this new phase of life, the transition can prompt or exacerbate underlying mental health vulnerabilities for others because of the significant developmental and academic stress and change. Beginning higher education is taxing in terms of psychological well-being, and declines can extend into the latter years (Bewick, Koutsopoulou, Miles, Slaa, & Barkham, 2010). Compared to those of similar age in the general population, a significantly greater percentage of students report worse psychological health, social functioning, and quality of life, and this pattern has been replicated in a multitude of countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, Netherlands, United Kingdom). Further, the stage of emerging adulthood as an independent risk factor for mental health concerns in college warrants consideration since this stage encompasses the greatest degree of individual and environmental transformation, which can make individuals susceptible to changes in psychopathology. In a US sample, approximately half of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 met the diagnostic criteria for at least one psychological disorder (Dopp, Lipson, & Eisenberg, 2013).

Rates indicate that the utilization of mental health services on campuses has been increasing consistently, and directors in the United States have seen growing numbers of students with severe mental health problems, with some estimates indicating that more than a third of students feel so depressed that they are unable to function, and that approximately 10% of students feel suicidal (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). Further, data from eight countries (Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Spain, and the United States) found that 31% of higher education students had symptoms in the past year that met the criteria for one or more mental health disorders, the most frequent of which were depression and anxiety (Auerbach et al., 2018). Generally, the first years of higher education across countries such as the United Kingdom, Israel,

and the United States bring an *increase* in negative mental health outcomes, such as distress and functional impairment, and a *decrease* in psychological well-being such as self-esteem and resilience. Addressing mental health vulnerabilities among higher education students is critical since psychopathology in college predicts future symptoms and dysfunction in relationships, development, and thinking styles.

7 Implications and Applications: Promoting a Successful Transition to Higher Education

The challenges of transitioning to higher education are increasingly recognized and addressed by institutions worldwide, particularly since student retention is an important indicator of institutions' quality. Many have implemented first- and second-year programming to support students and to teach adaptive skills in areas of academics, socialization, and psychological well-being. The first program students typically encounter is orientation, which helps students to acclimatize to the campus; to enroll in courses; to learn about campus resources, opportunities, and activities; and to establish connections with other incoming students during the summer prior to starting school. Beyond standard on-campus orientation sessions, some universities also hold wilderness/outdoor orientations with the specific aim of enhancing social adjustment. Additionally, these intensive orientation programs can foster personal growth and identity formation as students challenge beliefs about themselves and engage in exploration.

Once on campus, students benefit from participating in learning communities, wherein the same group of students takes multiple classes together and may even reside in the same university-owned housing. Learning communities include assignments and activities that require socialization and learning outside of the classroom. First-year participation is associated with benefits in academics, relationships with peers and faculty, social well-being, and civic engagement (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Further, such communities may be particularly beneficial for the social adjustment of at-risk (e.g., first-generation) higher education students. Another common method of addressing the first-year transition is through required or elective seminars. The smaller class sizes foster more intimate relationships with faculty and peers, provide students with more individualized and in-depth academic feedback, and encourage student engagement. Academically focused seminars may help students develop skills in broad areas such as writing and critical thinking, while other seminars may focus on improving psychological wellness by teaching active coping, stress reduction, and social and emotional intelligence skills. Participation in wellness-related seminars leads to significant psychological improvements, and program benefits can be optimized through monitored skills practice (Conley, Durlak, & Kirsch, 2015).

Additionally, having visible and accessible student development and academic service offerings is critical for first-year academic and social adjustment. Such offices commonly hold programming in areas of skill development (e.g., time management, study skills), campus-sponsored social events, and academic support, including advising and disability resources. Advising departments match first-year students to an academic adviser who may provide guidance on course schedules, ensure the completion of academic requirements, help with career planning, and connect students to other institutional resources. Further, academic services provide individual and group tutoring in

different subject areas, and peer mentoring can be particularly effective in bolstering the academic success of first-year students.

Furthermore, institutions purposefully create events and spaces wherein students can interact with faculty in hopes of promoting mentoring relationships. A review conducted by Australian scholars Glenda Crosling, Margaret Heagney, and Liz Thomas (2009) supports that engaging students in their studies, such as by holding office hours, can bolster their academic adjustment and retention by helping them navigate academic decisions, providing guidance on learning techniques, and offering emotional support as students adjust. Institutions across countries such as Australia and the United States typically offer several services that promote social adjustment, including peer mentoring, workshops, specialized housing (e.g., honors residence halls), and offices of student diversity and multicultural affairs. In sum, although the transition to higher education is accompanied by many challenges, there are numerous institutional approaches to support first-year adjustment in academics, relationships, and psychological well-being.

8 Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations in the field that are important to consider. Although the vast majority of research on university students and their experiences is conducted on 3-year (e.g., UK) or 4-year (e.g., US) programs, this is not representative of the heterogeneity of higher education programs. For example, approximately one third of American high school graduates in 2017 enrolled in an education program that was not 4 years long. Thus, the findings discussed here may have more limited application to students transitioning to 2-year associate or vocational training programs.

Additionally, there is an increasing need for research to include diverse student populations. Much of the research on the transition into university comes from the United States, Canada, and Europe even though enrollment in higher education has increased globally across many countries (Altbach et al., 2009). Research reflecting this trend will be important and should focus on higher education in a broader range of countries. Additionally, many studies include samples of students who are predominantly White, heterosexual, and from middle- or upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Given the impact that cultural diversity can have on students' transitions to and experiences in higher education, it is imperative for research to include cultural representativeness in their samples. Greater cultural representation will allow for findings to be generalizable and for unique cultural experiences to be examined more thoroughly.

SEE ALSO: Adaptability and Academic Development; Identity Development Processes; Peer Influence in Adolescence; Transition From Adolescence to Emerging Adulthood; Transitions Into Employment; Youth Unemployment

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