

ADJUSTMENT STAGES FOR THE INCOMING FRESHMAN STUDENT

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There are many adjustment stages that incoming freshmen often experience in making the transition from high school student to co-ed college student. Dealing with parents to dealing with roommates can also add to this stress. This will hopefully assist parents in finding ways to deal with their young adult after they have dropped them off at their new school

Instructors who work with college freshmen occupy a highly responsible position, since they can help make or break an incoming student's introduction to college. A student's experience in working one-to-one with you and learning how to think, read, and write more critically can help shape their college careers and their lives. Freshmen, however, are dealing with much more than just coursework in composition or biology or political science they are learning to live independently of their parents and they are learning to be more independent thinkers. Teaching Assistants are often eyewitnesses to students' struggles, most of which have little to do with the way the TAs teach their classes or who they are as people. TAs can make a tremendous difference in how students adjust to their new personal, academic, and social challenges. College freshmen frequently go through very identifiable stages in making these adjustments. Rather than taking responsibility for these stages yourself, if you understand that they are expected and usual, you can help your students through them. Most students embarking on their college careers are excited and a little scared. For many, this will be their first time away from home, with no one logging their steps or logging in their hours.

One of the major difficulties for new students is time management: for the first time attendance in class is largely optional (some classes are an exception, such as the writing courses); students usually don't even have daily or weekly assignments to help them keep on track, but are trusted instead to keep up with the reading, and then take a midterm and/or final. Prior to these tests, they generally have no idea how they are doing in a class. In addition to studying, they have to juggle domestic chores such as their laundry. Similarly, they are in a new environment where their high school reputation does not exist. For some this might be a blessing, but for others, this anonymity brings about an identity crisis: suddenly everyone around them is smart and capable, and they don't feel they stand out in the advantageous way they did in high school. All the rules are new, as well.

It seems contradictory, but at the same time that there is so much anxiety over college, there is great expectation of "immediate intellectual experiences and a thriving social life." At this point students expect everything to be interesting and exciting. While they will tell you they expect to work hard, they often don't consider that just working hard

doesn't necessarily yield an A grade; rather, they believe that pure effort should result in a high grade point average.

A few weeks into the quarter, however, the honeymoon starts to fade. Usually at midterm students are confronted with reality; they may be behind in their work and they've discovered they don't understand as well as they thought they did. Receipt of their first low grades is a shock. In classes where there is only a midterm and a final, a failing midterm grade begins to confirm students' worst fears that they won't succeed in college. Many students harbor deep fears about being "impostors," that somehow they did well in high school only because they were able to fool their teachers. Others will deal with their insecurity by believing that their teachers are bad. (It's quite common at this time for students to begin to talk of transferring to another school.) Graduate instructors sometimes begin to hear that it is their fault, their inexperience; it's the program's fault; it's the reading material. (Sometimes part of the fault does lie external to the student.) The students' inner fear of failure and of suddenly not being able to count on themselves to perform can be an overwhelming crisis.

The insecurity and fear students feel academically is often reinforced in their first visit home. Sometimes the return home is like a return to the womb; at other times it is a reminder that they really "can't go home again." Their bedroom may suddenly be the sewing room. More seriously, the return home is sometimes the occasion to hear the announcement of a divorce. Frequently couples wait until their child enters college to end a marriage.

As finals approach, panic generally sets in. Illness is rampant, and many students develop "sleeping sickness," sometimes sleeping up to 12 hours a day. When students are asked to work more independently, they may become very dependent, demanding your time or perhaps not putting forth their best effort. The important thing to remember is that students experience this with all their classes; no matter how much time or help you give them at the end of the quarter, the fear may still be there.

With your help and encouragement, the freshman students are more likely to get over the shock of their first bad grade if you offer them strategies for improvement, not just a grade. Finally students begin to see college as a total experience. They will begin to see connections between classes. They will begin to integrate a social life with their studies. And they will begin to develop more effective study habits. Integration and adjustment may occur within the first few weeks of class, or it may not happen until their senior year. But it will happen.

At many universities and colleges instructors have discovered that students tend to hit their lowest point in the winter quarter. Maybe it's partly Seasonal Affective Disorder: the sunny beach days are gone, and everything seems a little grey. There are no major holidays to look forward to, only one-third of the school year has passed, and there are still two quarters left of midterms and finals. While the end of school seems forever away, the quarter system has proven to be mercilessly swift, with little room for goofing off. Receipt of less-than-stellar grades in the fall also indicates a long hard winter ahead.

Spring quarter has a character all its own. Usually students have assimilated to college by then, and are beginning to look fairly realistically at both college life and themselves.

However, the warmer weather and the promise of summer vacation also make them a little irresponsible. In fact, everyone, including you, may develop "spring fever." You may experience more attrition in your classes and you may have a little harder time motivating your students and yourself.

You may not witness any of the stages described above, but they are probably there and students are struggling with them. Some students handle things effectively on their own; others, unable to see options or even a future without a straight-A grade point average, will be devastated. It is not uncommon for the TA to be the only one or the first one to recognize that a student is having serious problems. If you think your college student is in trouble, contact the college Counseling Center immediately and ask for their assistance.