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The Expectations and Perceptions of Incoming Freshmen at UNI

Kristin Michael

Presidential Scholars Senior Thesis

11 May 1998
I hereby verify that I have read and approved of Kristin Michael's senior thesis paper. I want to commend Kristin for the conscientious effort and exceptional insight she has displayed in designing, implementing, and writing up her research project.

Kent Sandstrom
5/11/98

Janet M. Rives, Chair, Presidential Scholars Board
5/12/98
The Perceptions and Expectations of Incoming Freshmen at UNI

Introduction to topic and site

As colleges and universities have become increasingly competitive in their recruitment and retention of students, they have placed greater emphasis on the quality of the freshman experience. The nature of this experience serves as the focus of this study. This paper draws upon qualitative data about the perceptions and expectations of students beginning their first year of enrollment at the University of Northern Iowa. In doing so, it examines students’ expectations and perceptions regarding their (1) prospective academic workload, (2) relationships with faculty, (3) relationships with peers, and (4) co-curricular involvements. While this study examines only the University of Northern Iowa, it offers findings that may have broader benefits. As Thompson and Fretz (1991, p. 446) observed, “findings from individual institutions have value in helping to explain behaviors that may be particular to inhabitants of that institution and consequently, useful on the campus wide level”.

The University of Northern Iowa is a mid-sized state university located in Cedar Falls, Iowa. In the Fall semester of 1997, undergraduate enrollment totaled 11,654, while graduate student enrollment totaled 1,454. Women comprised 58.5% of the student population. A total of 1,957 students entered in the Fall semester of 1997, making up 16.8% of total undergraduate enrollment. Of these new students, 94.8% entered as Iowa residents. Based on total undergraduate enrollment, 4% of students were classified as ethnic minorities, including 2% Black students, and the remaining 2% were categorized as Asian, Hispanic and American Indian students (Wyatt & Carlson, 1997).

Because most attrition takes place between students’ freshman and sophomore years of
college (Beal & Noel, 1980), a close examination of the freshman year experience provides insight into students' adjustment process, and their resulting decisions of whether or not to continue attending an institution. Of the 2,012 new freshman students who enrolled in the Fall semester of 1996, 92.4% returned in the following Spring semester of 1997, and 82.0% returned a year after enrollment in the fall of 1997 (Wyatt & Carlson, 1997).

Upon acceptance to UNI, 91.5% of the new freshmen students entering in the Fall of 1997 attended one of the two-day orientation sessions during June and July. At these sessions, they registered for classes, met current students and staff, toured the campus and residence halls, interacted with other incoming students, and were introduced to many of the University’s services. These students then began Fall semester classes in mid-August. These initial activities constitute students' first experiences with the university, and provide a starting point for the individuals in this project.

In this study, I examine 1) the perceptions and expectations that these students carried with them into their first semester of classes and 2) how these perceptions and expectations changed over the course of the students' first academic year. In doing so, I draw upon in-depth, qualitative interviews of a stratified sample of 12 UNI freshmen. These interviews enabled me to develop thick, rich descriptions of the perceptions of these students based on their current lived experiences. The sample of 12 students was selected from a complete list of registered incoming students for the Fall semester of 1997. The sample included six women and six men. Two of these students were African American, one was Asian American and two were from out-of-state.

The interview questions focused on a variety of issues, including residence hall living, the classroom setting, interactions with professors, social activities, dating relationships, interactions
with parents, decisions about a major, sources of anxiety, and the availability of support systems. This information was supplemented by data gathered during follow-up interviews with the same students at the beginning of the Spring semester of 1998. These second-stage interviews explored the students’ influential experiences since beginning college, disappointments, relationships with roommates, perceptions of academic workload and classroom atmosphere, experiences going home for winter break, attitudes toward finals; and overall changes in expectations. By the time the second set of interviews took place, two of the respondents had transferred to different institutions, one to an out-of-state community college and the other to a different state university in Iowa, and thus were interviewed by phone. In addition to discussing the above topics, these students also discussed their reasons for choosing to leave UNI.

During the interview process, several themes emerged which reveal how this group of students has experienced their first year of enrollment at the University of Northern Iowa. In the following analysis, these themes will be identified, developed and analyzed.

**Literature Review**

In recent years, researchers have emphasized the importance of the first year experience of students making the transition to colleges and universities, and the complex social and academic adjustments that have to be made during this time (Banning, 1989; Johnson, Staton & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995; Schwitzer, Robbings & McGovern, 1993; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Upcraft, Gardner & Associates, 1989). Most of these researchers have engaged in quantitative studies devoted to identifying specific factors that may be influencing the transition process. They have also focused on programs offered by universities to create a more effective adjustment period for new students, and on structural, psychological and academic factors that affect the first
year experience. Unfortunately, few of these researchers have adopted qualitative approaches that would allow them to better understand the rich and complex lived experience of students going through such transitions.

Much of the progress made in research centering on the experiences of first year students has surrounded the establishment of the National Conference on the Freshman Year Experience, first held in February 1983 at the University of South Carolina. The increasing growth in participation and recognition of this conference, and the numerous publications stemming from it, have led higher education and student affairs professionals to place more emphasis on the quality of students' experiences during their first year. Gardner (1986) labels this shift in focus the “freshman year enhancement movement” (p. 261). In response to this, a number of universities are implementing freshman seminar courses, such as the University of South Carolina’s “University 101: The Student in the University.” In addition to seminar courses, universities have also developed various other activities and programs to enhance the first year experience for freshman students and to increase freshman retention rates (Fidler, 1991; Gardner, 1986; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993; Tokuno & Campbell, 1992).

The goals of freshman seminar courses, and of similar institutional programs devoted to assisting freshmen in their adjustment to colleges, have been the focus of much discussion and research (Fidler, 1991; Gardner, 1986; Gordon & Grites, 1984). These programs encompass both academic and social adjustment to the university community. Gordon & Grites (1984) note that freshman seminar courses are essential, and that course content should include issues relating to academic concerns, personal/social concerns, and career planning information. They continue by stating that “the freshman seminar course is an excellent vehicle for helping students feel more
comfortable and accepted in a new environment that may be perceived as strange and threatening” (p. 319). In addition to the seminar course, researchers analyzing the freshman year experience have focused a great deal on programs and support mechanisms, whether included in the curriculum or developed as skills for faculty and staff, that might help freshmen successfully assimilate into the university community (Gardner, 1986; Gordon & Grites, 1984; Robinson, 1972). Relevant programs include those that “encourage and teach faculty to practice mentoring behaviors so that students will develop special bonding relationships with them”, or that create “special administrative units for freshmen such as freshman centers, freshman advising units, etc.,” or that promote “efforts to improve instruction in uniquely freshman disciplines” (Gardner, 1986, p. 266).

Programs such as those outlined above, including the freshman seminar concept, have been in place in some institutions since the turn of the century, with the earliest established in 1911 at Reed College in Portland, Oregon (Gordon & Grites, 1984). These seminars are not uniform across campuses. However, a survey of over 2,600 institutions in the United States found that 77.8% offered a course focusing in some way on “coping with college” (El-Khawas, 1984). According to Stephanie Ritrivi of UNI’s Academic Advising Office, a great deal of discussion has focused on such a course over the past year, and a task force has been formed to provide recommendations on implementing some kind of comprehensive first year program. However, no such course is currently offered for all freshmen at the university.

A number of researchers have been working to identify which specific needs and concerns faced by freshmen should be addressed in seminar courses and similar programs. (Johnson, Staton & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995; Maisto & Tammi, 1991; Schwitzer, 1993; Thompson...
Michael & Fretz, 1991). This research has been primarily quantitative, but some qualitative studies have been carried out. For instance, Johnson, Staton & Earp (1995, p. 337) took an ecological approach to examine "students' socialization to the university environment". This qualitative analysis focused on the communication implications that various residence hall arrangements have on the socialization process, both academically and socially. Through focus group interviews with students, the researchers found that interpersonal and small group communication, especially as related to building social relationships between students, were some of the most significant factors in the development of a positive view of the freshman year experience. The structure of residence hall arrangements was also found to be significant in the building of new and fulfilling relationships between students, a finding explored in an earlier study by Pascearella & Terenzini (1981). These researchers found that students housed in a residence hall arrangement providing extensive study space, laboratories, live-in academic staff, and classrooms had a positive impact on the relationships between faculty and students, which therefore improved the students' educational outcomes.

A growing base of quantitative research related to the freshman year experience has examined the impact that several different variables have on student adjustment to colleges and universities. Much of this research has been conducted with instruments such as the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (Baker & Siryk, 1984), which measures student adjustment to the university community. Mooney, Sherman & LoPresto (1991, p. 447) used this questionnaire, among others, with 88 female college freshmen in order to measure the effect of such variables as academic locus of control (or "belief in personal control over outcomes"), self-esteem, and perceived distance from home as predictors of college adjustment. The researchers
Michael noted that “it seems... that college adjustment is simply not a function of single variables but the result of a whole host of interrelated conditions”. This notion of interrelated variables informed my research. Rather than focusing on an interview structure that imposed strict categories and focused on specific variables, the interviews in my study were relatively unstructured, and allowed the respondents to freely discuss interrelated variables.

In working to adjust to the new variables associated with life at a university, students often experience a feeling of incongruence between their individual interests, goals, values and abilities and different aspects of the university environment. As Thompson & Fretz (1991, p. 438) note, the concepts of congruence within the field of higher education “suggest[s] that a good fit between students... and the environment... has a positive impact and promotes satisfaction, achievement and personal growth, whereas a poor fit creates stress”. Some studies have suggested that black students attending predominantly white institutions have more difficulty achieving congruence than white students at the same institutions (Fleming, 1984; Gibbs, 1982; Suen, 1983; Thompson & Fretz, 1991). Thompson & Fretz (1991), using the concept of congruence, worked with a sample of black students (nearly half of which were freshmen) at a predominantly white mid-western university in order to identify variables that help in the process of adjustment. This study found that Black students had access to more variables that assisted in their social adjustment than white students, such as high levels of communalism, positive attitudes toward cooperative learning situation, negative attitudes toward individualistic learning situations, and strong cognitive and cultural schema. However, black students had less access to resources that would enhance their levels of academic adjustment. This is relevant to the current study, as the black students in my study talked extensively about the importance of social support
from their peers, and how it assisted in the adjustment to a predominantly White institution.

Building on the research described above, this project will offer a qualitative description of the perceptions of a small sample of students currently going through the freshman adjustment period. Studies which have stressed the important elements comprising a freshman year program, the interdependence of several key variables, and the struggle for students to resolve person-environment incongruence both guide and shape this study, as they influenced the content and structure of my interview sessions. The themes that emerge from the analysis of the students' perceptions will provide a clearer understanding of the daily, lived experiences of freshman students at the University of Northern Iowa. It is only through such an in-depth look at students such as these that an institution can understand what the freshman year experience means, and how it influences the subsequent programs and philosophies of that institution.

Description of methods

The subjects of this study are students who graduated from high school in 1996-97 and began their first semester of enrollment at the University of Northern Iowa during the Fall semester of 1997. After this proposal was approved by the Human Subjects Review Board in August, 1997, I was provided with a list of registered incoming freshmen, along with their addresses and phone numbers. From this list, I compiled a sample of 15 incoming freshmen based on sex, geographic distribution and minority status. After I called each of these students, 12 agreed to participate in the project and signed informed consent forms that had been approved by the Human Subjects Review Board.

The subjects were asked to participate in semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the researcher, approximately 30-45 minutes in length, which I audiotaped with their permission.
Interviews initially took place in the group study rooms in the Rod Library, but were moved to Club ‘91 in Maucker Union in order to provide a more informal atmosphere. The first set of interviews completed by the subjects took place during the first six weeks of the Fall semester, 1997 and focused on the impressions, expectations and perceptions that each student held regarding the topics identified earlier. The second set of interviews took place during the first six weeks of the Spring semester, 1998, and explored how the students’ expectations and perceptions had changed throughout the course of the academic year. Both sets of interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and a student helper hired by the researcher. Following transcription, the interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes. All names used in the analysis for the purpose of citing respondent quotations have been changed to ensure confidentiality

**Analysis**

After completing the first stage of interviews, a number of preliminary themes emerged related to the expectations students brought with them to the university. Each of these four themes highlights some of the primary areas of concern and anticipation articulated by the students. These four themes include concerns relating to academic performance, meeting new people, choosing a major, and experiencing independence.

**On “Making the Grade”--Concerns about Academic Performance**

Throughout the interview process, the primary area of concern voiced by the freshmen was related to doing well academically. Often, this was specifically expressed as wanting to get good grades. When asked about his main concern upon entering the university, Cory remarked, “maintaining good grades. I kind of want to concentrate on keeping good grades instead of ‘Oh,
I was out partying.” Like others, Cory noted that some obstacles to achieving his academic goals would include “partying and other people, distractions. Just people, I guess. It’s kind of up to me, too. If I want to get good grades, I have to go do it. That’s the biggest thing, to actually go sit down and study.” Cory’s comments reveal how adjustment is viewed as primarily an individualized process. People are seen as distractions, and academic success is defined as a personal matter. Cindy also elaborated on this theme when indicating that her main concern was “sitting down and studying every night. Because I heard that the field I’m going into is one of the hardest. I’m going to have to be studying all the time. And I don’t mind studying, but having to sit down hours and hours on end doing one subject after another. I think that’s going to be the hard part while all of my friends are out doing something.” Like Cindy, most of the students I interviewed felt that new academic expectations would have to be dealt with individually. Friends and social activities were more of a distraction from studies than a component of academic success. One interviewee, Tony, did seem to incorporate the connection between social and academic adjustment when he discussed his concerns about academic performance. He stated, “I’m not really confident at all. I’m kind of shy. I’m not really too confident just stepping into the classroom. It will change with time, probably after first semester. Once I get to know more people it will be better.” Here, Tony equates getting to know more people with gaining more confidence in the classroom setting.

In the first stage of interviews, grades and social “distractions” were seen largely as a dichotomy. In essence, achieving good grades was viewed as the main concern, while people and other social activities were often viewed as the alternative. This focus on only two primary variables may be due to the tendency for high school teachers and parents to emphasize the
importance of academic success, and the tendency for college-age friends to discuss the college social scene. Many of those interviewed indicated that high school teachers had warned them of how difficult the university would be academically, and that they would have to study extensively in order to do well. This separation of social and academic adjustment was bridged during the second stage of interviews, with recognition that social support was integral in adapting to the demands of the classroom.

Meeting People and “Making Connections”

While academic performance was the primary concern for the students in this study, the prospect of “meeting new people” was a primary source of interest and anticipation. This concept of meeting people was not necessarily elaborated on, and a limited amount of explanation accompanied the students’ mention of the phrase. However, an interest in meeting people was consistently noted during the interviews. Some of the freshmen anticipated meeting people at parties, in the residence halls and in classes. As Cory states, “It doesn’t seem hard but I’m not trying to go out and meet people, I just let it happen.” Rachel elaborates by stating, “I’m anxious to meet different and neat people. And I’m confident that “I’ll meet new people...” Statements such as these were common among the freshmen interviewed, however little elaboration on this theme emerged. All seemed to view this as important, but few explained why or what significance this concept had on their college experience. This theme might infer that meeting people was a method that these students expected to use in order to make connections, and to become integrated socially into the university environment.

A few students did express some level of anxiety about meeting people. These students possessed a range of demographic characteristics, and no pattern emerged related to this.
However, these students did appear more shy, and communicated less openly in the interview setting. In fact, one of them identified himself as being “shy” and “not confident.” Jenny stated that she was nervous about “starting over and making new friends. Because none of my friends are here. It seems hard to make friends because they all seem to have their own friends here. I think I’ll try to join organizations and stuff. I’ll look into that.” This statement seems to reflect a concern for finding and meeting individuals in a situation similar to one’s own. As Jenny observed, she is hoping to meet people that didn’t already have their own friends here. She anticipated actively seeking out new friends through organizations and other groups, but she seemed unsure of where exactly to begin looking.

Choosing a Major

When the topic of choosing a major was raised, a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty was often expressed by the interview participants. It seemed that choosing a major was linked to having a purpose at the university. While some freshmen indicated that they weren’t that worried about choosing a major, most expressed a strong desire to decide on a field of study as soon as possible. As Cindy states when discussing the importance of choosing a major,

“I think its very important. I’m the type of person who plans years down the road, like I have a certain plan, what I want to do when I graduate from college. If I didn’t have my major chosen right now, I’d feel lost, not knowing what to do.”

Jenny indicates a similar perspective when she explains the importance of knowing her major.

“Very important. I knew from the beginning of my senior year that I wanted psychology. I’m very goal oriented and I want to stick with that. I don’t want to start over.” These perspectives, and others similar to them, indicate that the freshmen view the university experience as training
for a career or vocation rather than a setting for a holistic educational experience. This may be tied to the earlier theme stressing the importance of academic performance. These students believe that planning and setting goals cannot occur without specifying a major field of study. This is alarming, as such a career-oriented emphasis might take away from a focus on exploration, discovery and a liberal arts education.

Some students viewed the choice of a major as a highly external process, stressing even more the failure to value elements of self-discovery and exploration within the university experience. For instance, Amy remarked,

"I called the advising office and made an appointment and went over there and they had all of these cards and different things they did to me and different questions. I'm like, whatever you can do to me, just do it and figure out what I want to do. They did all that. So basically it turned out business."

In Amy's case, she was so concerned about choosing a major that she relied on various instruments and the recommendations of others to decide on her career interest. Rather than explaining that she chose business as a major, she states that "it turned out business." The personal experience of exploring career interests was depersonalized.

Even when students indicated that they weren't sure about a major, and knew that it was all right to be undecided, they often indicated some level of anxiety related to the issue. When asked about whether she had chosen a major, Rachel stated,

"Well right now not really. I kind of declared Elementary Education and I want to change it. But I really don't know when I'm supposed to have it in stone, so I do feel a little pressure because I don't really know when I'm supposed to have it. But I've been told
that I have time to decide. I’ve been told that I have time, so a little pressure.”

As Rachel talks through this issue, her repetition of statements indicating uncertainty and her tendency to link that uncertainty with “a little pressure” is telling. Even though she’s been told that it is not necessary to have chosen a major right now, feelings of pressure exist. Reasons for these feelings of pressure and anxiety included wanting to graduate in four years, wanting to lay out a plan now and stick to it, and having been awarded a scholarship from a particular college or department. Some respondents’ discussions about wanting to choose a major revealed a desire to know which field of study they would be entering so that they wouldn’t have to worry about choosing anymore, thus making the college experience more stable. Future research might explore the reasons for this career-orientation, and the corresponding feelings of anxiety and pressure accompanying this theme.

“Establishing Independence: Making It “On One’s Own”

Much like the concern with academics, the freshmen I interviewed often saw the transition to the university as an individualized process. The students indicated that they looked forward to “being independent” or “being on my own.”

Independence carried a number of meanings for the freshman subjects, including freedom from parental authority, being able to make one’s own decisions, and setting one’s own limits. Jenny looked forward to “being independent, by myself and not worrying about stuff. Just doing what I want. Just being on my own and not having a parent there nagging you.” As Ben states, “I’ve been in sports for four years and I’ve been under my parent’s eye and all, so I mean, I really don’t have to be home at a certain time, I don’t really. It doesn’t matter what condition I’m in.”

This emphasis on independence and freedom from authority might have implications regarding
the type of guidance and advising services that a university provides. For example, rather than using a direct, authoritative approach by faculty and staff in explaining different general education courses, less threatening, peer facilitated discussion groups might be more well received by new students. Rather than following the role of parents, professors and advisors could encourage collaborative and student centered approaches. This application would be beneficial to students who are hesitant about their new position of independence, as well. Cory suggests that some freshman are initially scared as they enter the university because “you’re going to college and it’s going to be bigger and you’re on your own. It’s like being independent and there’s no one to tell you what to do and when you have to do it, and so it’s all up to you...”. When this adjustment to a less structured environment evokes fear on the part of the student, support should be provided by the university. While independence was often viewed as exciting, the higher level of decision making demanded of students when its “all up to you” could lead to a difficult transition.

The second stage of interviews focused on topics similar to the first, and indicated the changing perspectives of students well into their first academic year at the university. The three specific themes emerging from this set of interviews include (1) finding a balance, (2) finding sources of social support, and (3) meeting people of greater diversity.

**Finding a balance**

During the second interviews, my respondents focused on a broader range of topics and concerns. By the second semester, they were beginning to recognize how many different components made up their first year experience. As Cindy observed,

“Before I came to college I would have thought that I’d spend all my time studying and
very little time socializing. And as soon as I got here my idea would have been I would have spend more time socializing than studying, but its definitely different. I've gone through a lot. But if you manage your time between taking a break, relaxing, doing your homework, going to class, spending time with your friends, then your load isn't too much.”

These types of responses indicate a recognition that time management, and balancing between a number of new elements both socially and academically, is an important component of the first year experience.

Similarly, Ben stated that in order to have an “ideal semester” he would
“maybe play basketball two or three times a week. Maybe on a workout schedule. And a job, maybe ten hours a week. And maybe set study times. These are all my goals I haven’t gotten to yet.”

In this case, Ben felt that he hadn’t adapted to the university setting as he would have hoped. Many of the elements that he wanted to incorporate into his university experience were not in place. By using the term “maybe” before each statement, Ben indicates that he is somewhat unsure of whether these goals will be reached. Many of the others interviewed spoke in a more active voice, explaining the learning process that they were working through, and how that would allow them to balance more effectively a number of new elements. However, as Ben noted, “These are my goals I haven’t gotten to yet.” Rather than speaking as though he is actively involved in pursuing these goals, it appears that he is separated from them. This may help to explain why Ben transferred to a different state university at the end of his first semester as a UNI student.
While the respondents were recognizing additional variables in their process of adjustment, they still identified academic success as a top priority. As Rachel stated, “The thing I have to focus on is my grades, getting my work done and just generally keeping a balance between everything. When I say I’m adapting, I mean that I’m working to keep a balance, so that’s my main focus right now. And my top priority is my education and just generally adapting to the culture shock and to different classes.” Rachel’s statement highlights the importance of learning to balance all of these new social, academic and emotional elements of life in the adaptation process.

This quotation also highlights a component of adaptation often uniquely challenging to minority students on campus. As an African American student, she recognizes the importance of “adapting to the culture shock” upon entering the university. In describing this “culture shock”, Rachel highlights the low numbers of ethnic minority students on campus in comparison to her high school, which had a large population of African American students and Hispanic students. In describing some of her large lecture classes, Rachel explained, “looking out I can tell the teachers look out and they can see only a couple of black spots, and I’m not used to that.” This topic of adaptation to culture shock, and to the small numbers of minority students on campus, was raised only by the minority students in the group. Later in the analysis, the role of social support in working through this challenge will be explored.

Finding sources of social support

During the first stage of interviews, the transition to the university seemed to mean a highly individualized process for the freshmen interviewed. After a semester of adjustment to college life, the emphasis these students placed on the role of social support in the adjustment
process was significant. Rather than making this transition “on their own,” the freshmen were beginning to realize the social support necessary to make it through the first year as a university student. The sources of social support indicated by each student were varied, from parents to professors to new friends. While the sources of support differed between people, the importance placed on their encouragement was consistent. As Amy stated,

“I guess my mom really helps me, too because I want to make my parents happy, proud I guess. And so I called my mom at work right after, it was my last test, it was on Thursday. And I called my mom, I’m ready to cry telling her about the test and she’s like, ‘Well, its not. Its okay. If you don’t pass it you can just take it over.’ And she was so awesome about it. She really helps me out there. So my mom always talks me back up. And I got my grades and I got a 2.5 and I thought that, I just felt that I should have done better. And then everyone’s like, ‘that’s so good for your first semester.’ But I still call my mom... she helps me when I’m feeling dumb I guess.”

In Amy’s case, her mom was a consistent source of encouragement and comfort during times when her academic expectations weren’t met.

For Ashley, social support was also found back at home, but in her relationship with her boyfriend rather than her parents. She remarked,

“I have a boyfriend who’s back at home and actually, he’s very, very supportive. I call him all the time and he hears my problems and he helps me out. He’s been through college, so he understands what I’m going through. And that really helps me a lot to know that one of my friends has been through it. And it kind of helps me guide my way and I’m confident about it.”
While Ashley’s reliance on her boyfriend for support seems to play an important role in her adjustment to the university, risk lies in the possibility that this relationship will end, as many do during the first year of college. When a student’s major sources of social support come from home, and are not necessarily stable, a difficult transition can result.

Many of the students that indicated systems of social support developed at the university expressed positive feelings about their university experience. As Cindy observed,

“If it weren’t for friends I probably would have gone crazy a long time ago stressing about different classes that I wasn’t doing well in. But my friends were always there to help me out, calm me down. I probably would have felt alone and that isn’t a good thing. That would have affected my personality and performance at school. So I think the socializing and meeting new people and going out and having fun plays an important part in college.”

In this statement, we see a new perspective developing in comparison to the statements made during the first semester. Rather than separating academics and social experiences, Cindy sees them as interdependent, with one supporting and contributing to the other.

The social networks available to ethnic minority students on campus were vital to the minority students I interviewed, especially in relation to the unique “culture shock” element of college adaptation that Rachel noted earlier. In discussing her sources of social support, Rachel explained that

“All the people I went to are all minorities except for one lady, who is the director of my hall. Because it seems like they can relate to me more and they understand kind of where you came from. They understand you better than the other people that are not like you."
And they seem more supportive to me. I mean, I feel they’re the ones I go to when I need help. They’re the ones that opened their arms to me.”

During the first stage of interviews, Rachel and Jenny indicated that minority student groups and staff members were overly insistent, telling them to come to meetings and get-togethers for groups that they hadn’t heard of before. In fact, Jenny seemed to resent this, indicating that she hadn’t signed up for these groups and didn’t know why they kept contacting her. However, by the second stage of interviews, these same students expressed how central these people and groups had been in their first semester at the university. For example, Jenny, an Asian American student, said,

“I’m a member of SOAR, which is a minority tutoring group. I think that helped me a lot because if I didn’t have it, I wouldn’t know who to go to if I needed help. I’d be like, ‘Okay, I’ll just ignore it.’ I know I have them so I can just talk to one of them, one of the leaders of SOAR and just find out what to do and where to go to begin to solve the problem.”

The initiative taken by ethnic minority groups such as SOAR initially seemed overpowering to Rachel and Jenny, but ultimately it provided them with an important source of support and help.

The importance of finding networks of social support is illustrated most dramatically when analyzing the insights provided by the two students that decided to transfer after their first semester at UNI. When talking about aspects of the college experience that had been disappointing to her, Anne first explained “I felt socially it was hard to meet people. There wasn’t much set up to meet people. But I kind of lived on a floor that was mostly upper classmen or sophomores and above that didn’t want to go to anything, hall stuff.” After stating
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this, Anne suggested that UNI should “maybe have more freshman dorms and have the people who are all new together instead of more mixed around.” In essence, Anne felt that she wasn’t surrounded by people going through the same transitions that she was experiencing. She had hoped to be surrounded by “people who are all new together.” Later in the interview, she indicated that the teachers at UNI had come through for her when she had problems. This further accentuates the impact that a strong social network has on student adaptation to the university, even though other academic components of the first year experience might be satisfactory.

The importance of building strong social networks provides insight into the reasons that some students are dissatisfied with their freshman year experience. When these social networks are not built and developed, students may look elsewhere for social support, and subsequently leave the university. For example, Ben explained that by transferring to a different state university, he hoped to “improve my social life.” He explains that because he often left on the weekends to visit his girlfriend, “I never really got to stay at college and just be a college student.” This prevented him from hooking into social networks at UNI, thus leading to a more negative overall university experience.

**Meeting people of greater diversity**

As became clear during the first stage of interviews, meeting new people seemed to be the first step of socialization to the university community for freshman students. However, the students I interviewed initially provided little elaboration when talking about the significance of meeting people, and what it meant for them. After the second stage of interviews, the students described in detail the people they had met, particularly those who had influence them during their first semester. These descriptions seemed to indicate that the new students were hoping to
continue meeting new people with different perspectives and from different backgrounds.

When asked about an influential experience during her first semester, Ashley stated, “Probably my roommate and the friends she hung out with and I hung out with. Their thoughts and ideas I’d never really thought about and were quite different than mine. It’s kind of hard to deal with people whose thoughts are totally different from me and thought my views were wrong. Just their views on most of the popular topics--like abortion or violence--they thought one way and I thought another way. It just showed me so many different ways of thinking about things in the world. I think it was a good thing. I got upset a lot of times, but I think it was good. It opened my eyes a little more to other people’s way of life.”

While Ashley described this as a “good” experience, she later revealed that conflicts with her roommate were also a factor in her decision to transfer second semester. Other students searching for more diversity had already found networks of friends with similar views and interests, and were looking to branch out from that base. This indicates that a group of friends with similar perspectives creates an opportunity for adjustment and a sense of security after which students feel more prepared to confront different perspectives.

Tony offered deeper insight into the function that meeting people played in his transition to the university after having completed a semester. He remarked, “You’re just thrown into an environment that you have to react to. I mean, you don’t know anything. It’s just like, you’re there with tons of people you don’t know. So you get to know people. When you’re completely out of your element you just react instead of trying to figure things out. I think I reacted pretty well. You just meet people, talk to
them. New friends, and people.”

In this case, adjusting to a new setting meant simply “reacting,” and meeting people was the most immediate way of doing that. The concept of reacting indicates that Tony feels little control over his adaptation to the university. Instead of the students taking control of this new situation, the university setting is acting upon the student, forcing them to react and cope as best they can. Meeting people was a way of coping with being out of one’s element, and reacting well is equated with talking to people and making new friends. In a sense, this interaction with peers is the only way to begin functioning in a new environment.

The ethnic minority students in the study, Rachel, Jenny and Alex, indicated that they hoped UNI would increase the amount of cultural diversity on campus. Because others had “warned” them of the lack of ethnic minority students on campus, they felt prepared for the “culture shock.” However, they stressed that a more diverse population would enrich their social and academic experience. As Rachel observed in reference to how the university could improve, “I think that if we increase the African-American population that will help a little. And the Hispanic population, too.”

Perceptions of Professors

In addition to the themes that emerged from the new students’ interview data, another set of perceptions provided insight into a new student’s “making sense of” the university setting. Initially, many of the freshman I interviewed indicated that professors seemed “big,” “intimidating,” and “extremely knowledgeable.” As Rachel indicated, “I just expected them to be knowledgeable—extremely knowledgeable—more than my
high school professors and more professional. And more down to business. Someone that’s boring. Someone that talks a lot and just talks, and just lectures. I never thought they would do anything else but talk. No more group projects and no more, you know, silly little stuff.”

This notion of being “talked at” was introduced by several students, and correlated with a seemingly detached, bigger than life perception of the professor. Some students indicated that they would only individually approach the professor if they had a problem that needed to be addressed. After the second stage of interviews, a few students described situations where an instructor had taken the initiative to approach them interpersonally. Descriptions of these types of interactions were always positive in nature. Many of the students that I interviewed changed their perceptions of professors from the first semester to the second semester, largely because of influential professors that they had in class. Students involved in lecture classes with no professor/student interaction still held their initial perceptions of the detached, intimidating professor. However, those students who had been involved in classes with professors that engaged students, or with professors who took the initiative to approach students interpersonally, had different perceptions during the second stage of interviews. These new perceptions were linked to professors that had “made our class laugh every day,” “tried new things,” “interacted more with students,” and “set up classes that are discussion-like.” Ben revealed his changing perceptions and preferences when he stated, “Before I said I like big lectures. I do sometimes, but it’s nice to have a smaller class. It’s kind of nice to be involved in the class, not just being talked to.” Tony elaborated on how his perceptions of professors had changed when he stated, “They’re definitely more involved than I thought they would be. They’re more, you know, ask questions,
come to the office. Definitely talk to you more one-on-one."

The high level of credibility linked to the professor image also served to increase the impact of interpersonal interactions with their students. One student described her experience when one of her professors complemented her on her public speaking skills after class, and encouraged her to join the speech team. She stated,

"...I look at the things I’ve done in my life and I would never think I was a good speaker and she said that I read the poem good. I was like, ‘I did?’, and I look at that kind of stuff and say, ‘Well hey, I must be kind of good at this or something.’"

At the same time, a couple of students emphasized that they would rather keep their relationships with professors on an impersonal level right now, and get to know them later in major classes. He stated,

"I just kind of want to be left alone right now. But as I work my way up, get my feet on the ground, I want to be able to talk to my professors about anything. I want to know how I’m doing. But right now, I just don’t want to be bothered. I don’t want to worry about going to a professor right now, it’s not really important to me."

Both of the students expressing this view were men, raising the possibility that this perception is influenced by gender. This perception could be explained by considering Tony’s statement that, "I like the lecture class because you don’t really have to think. You’re just kind of there absorbing it.” This indicates that classes with less professor interaction, such as lecture classes, are easier, and have less accountability. This might be appealing to students that are fearful of jumping into a difficult class.

**Policy Recommendations**
Throughout the course of the interviews, some of the new students suggested how the university community could improve their first year experience. These suggestions related to different areas of the university, including residence halls, classroom policies and social opportunities. These recommendations offer us insight into the types of programs and policies that might improve “the freshman year experience” from the perspective of those currently involved in that experience.

For faculty members, one student suggested,

“I know it’s hard when you have a class of 250 kids, but if you could just take the time each day to stop someone as they’re walking out the door and say, ‘How are things going? Do you need help with things?’ or even if they sent an e-mail, which is easy enough to do. Just a little something to make the students know the teacher’s there, that they’re not just a number in the class--that the teacher doesn’t even know their name or something.”

For a university emphasizing that “Great Teaching Makes the Difference,” this suggestion should be taken to heart.

Another student suggests,

“Have support groups for incoming freshmen. It would provide activities for some of the new freshmen to come together. Maybe have activities for them to come together and meet each other and have fun together and they will support you as far as updating you on your grade--midterm grades. They would provide you with tutoring and help you in general. Helping you adapt to college, to coming to college.”

The importance of creating supportive social networks within the university community was
emphasized earlier, and would likely be the guiding purpose behind this suggestion. While parents and friends from home are helpful, finding support among peers in one's own situation, both academically and socially, would strengthen the first year experience.

While discussing residence life, one student elaborated on this need for social networks among peers. She stated,

"I felt like socially it was hard to meet people. There wasn’t set up to meet people. But I lived on a floor that was mostly upper classmen or sophomores and above. Maybe have more freshman dorms and have the people who are all new together instead of more mixed around."

**Discussion**

Throughout the course of this study, the complex process of adjusting to the university environment became more understandable and meaningful through the perceptions and experiences shared by the students that I interviewed. Both academically and socially, a positive first year experience was characterized by students and faculty engaging themselves in the classroom, as well as in outside activities and relationships. By providing information and encouragement to students searching for sources of social support, opportunities for diversity and help in balancing the increasing number of variables involved in university adjustment, universities can enhance the first year experience for their students. A commitment to these goals would address student retention issues, as well as the continual search for ways to improve the quality of education provided by an institution.

This study relates to previous literature by further highlighting the need for university supported freshman seminars and related programs. As earlier research notes, freshmen face a
difficult transition to the university by being placed in “a new environment that may be perceived as strange and threatening” (Gordon & Grites, 1984, p. 319). By using a qualitative approach, this study provides a more thorough understanding of how UNI students adjust to the social and academic changes that they face during their first year, and how this adjustment period could be enriched by the university. Future research could focus on specific programs addressing the freshman year experience, and examine the level of success that these programs have in assisting freshmen in the adjustment to university life.
References


