Senior Year Transitions:

From College to Career and From Undergraduate to Graduate School

Heather D. Shea

This article will describe the qualities, unique needs, and concerns of traditionally aged college seniors as they graduate. Following the description is a discussion regarding the specific programs and interventions that colleges and universities can provide for their graduating seniors to help them transition into the workforce or graduate school.

INTRODUCTION

Today's group of traditionally aged college students (age 18-23) was born between 1975 and 1980. This generation has emerged with the label "Generation X," though according to Levine and Cureton (1998), only one in ten young people would use this phrase to describe themselves. Some call them upbeat and optimistic, while others say they are slackers, and still others characterize them as angry at past generations for the problems they have inherited. While describing some individual characteristics, these designations give little indication about the generation as a whole. If anything is known about today's college students, it is that this group is difficult to generalize or label.

However, it is known that today's college students lack a singular, impactful, and defining moment comparable to their parents' Vietnam, or their grandparents' World War II. Therefore, although enthusiasm for student activism is widespread, there are many themes and few common causes. While few political and social events have initiated a generation-wide response, several incidents have been identified by today's
students as significant. According to Levine and Cureton (1998), students today ranked the Persian Gulf War (89%), the *Challenger* explosion (84%), the fall of the Berlin Wall (84%), the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill (84%), the Rodney King incident (83%), and the breakup of the USSR (81%) as significant. It also is interesting to note that the world they understand always has known the AIDS virus, MTV, and personal computers. For many incoming first-year students, the primary motivation for attending college is related to job preparation and increasing earning potential. Going to college has become a "means to an end," because students perceive it to be the only way to get the job, family, and life of their parents' generation. According to Levine and Cureton (1998), the most important reason students cite for going to college in the 1990s is to prepare for a career. Due to this reason, it becomes necessary for colleges and universities to examine the level of preparation afforded to their graduating seniors to enter the career world.

**COLLEGE SENIORS AS PEOPLE IN TRANSITION**

Approximately 1.2 million college seniors officially will complete the academic requirements necessary to receive a baccalaureate degree at the end of this academic year (Gardner, 1998). Most of the students in this group have identified personal, professional, and educational goals for their futures. For some, this includes searching for a first job or starting their own business, others are prepared to pursue an advanced degree, and still others are concerned about financially preparing themselves to pay off debts and support a family. Whatever their future goals, every class of college graduates faces a transition in their lives upon graduation. Given this reality, how prepared are graduates to face an unsettled economy, a competitive job market, or the rigors of graduate and/or professional school? Many seniors are concerned about their level of preparedness and ability to adapt to life outside the university setting.
TRANSITION TO THE WORKING WORLD

For many students, the job search process begins well before their senior year. In fact, 85% of students report coming to college with a specific career in mind (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Throughout college, some students participate in internships or other practical experiences to determine their interest in a certain company or field, as well as to work on compiling their resumes and writing their cover letters. Many students attend career and job fairs, searching for possible employment opportunities as the job search nears its end during their senior year. Other students are members of campus professional clubs associated with their career track of interest such as business, science, and engineering. In fact, professional clubs can be found on more than three-quarters of all college campuses and are the largest and most popular student organizations on campus today. Furthermore, the need for many students to work part-time while attending college (60%) and even to work full-time while in attendance (24%) results in a very purposeful, career-oriented mind-set about the undergraduate experience (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

For those students who have had few opportunities to work during their college years, the transition from student to employee can be a dramatic shift. While it is difficult to generalize about every job, many have strict time schedules, lack constant feedback (like grades for example), and give employees little independence or flexibility as opposed to college life. Experiencing a smooth transition to a work environment can be a struggle for some students if they are not prepared to develop a different mind-set. According to Holton (1998), if seniors are not taught about the workplace environment, they may unknowingly continue to expect their first job to be like college. Many of the behaviors that managers label as "immature," or "naive," are behaviors higher education not only has tolerated, but rewarded and encouraged (Holton, 1998). Some behaviors that could hold graduates back include the following: inability to work independently without constant feedback or direction, complaining about not being allowed to use the
skills that they were taught in college, and challenging the established policies and procedures too quickly at their new job. A new employee's concern may arise as a result of these untold directions.

As mentioned earlier, a majority of students are motivated to attend college because they expect their classes, and ultimately their degree, to prepare them for work in their desired field. Traditionally, students spend between four and five years pursuing an education, in hopes that they are receiving adequate training for their first job. The reality demonstrates that many graduates are forced to look outside their field of study for their first job, or find they are unable to apply their major course of study to their job. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), most evidence consistently indicates that only about 50% of college graduates report a close or direct relationship between their undergraduate major and their job(s). However, employees found that there is more of a connection between specific learned skills and their utilization in the first job after graduation compared to subsequent jobs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

TRANSITION TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

In the minds of many students, the master's degree has replaced the bachelor's degree as entry-level criteria for most professional jobs (Levine & Cureton, 1998). From one perspective, the pursuit of advanced degrees has become more common, as the National Center for Education Statistics recorded a 36% increase in the number of master's degrees awarded between 1984 and 1994. Given this, it is interesting to note that those individuals with advanced degrees still are a relative rarity in our society, with only 5.1% of the population holding master's degrees and only 1% holding doctorates (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). The high number of college students intending to go directly into graduate school has changed the way graduate school is viewed in the United States. Graduate programs
often are thought of as specialized, focused study, with much personal attention and guidance given to graduate students. Because of these characteristics, the academic rigor of the schoolwork is the greatest shift seniors are forced to make when entering graduate school.

Do seniors contemplating graduate school fully realize the differences between graduate-level expectations as compared to those at the undergraduate level? Students accustomed to participating in a wide variety of social and recreational activities may find they have little time for these pursuits. Instead, conducting research, working with professional organizations, and attending conferences and seminars becomes a part of graduate student life. Focusing on one concentrated area of study is a key component to graduate school. Because of this focus, graduate students may enjoy the opportunity to work or teach in their field through assistantships. While completing a bachelor's degree, courses within a certain department or major are only part of the academic requirements. Outside of his or her major, an undergraduate may study many subjects he or she may or may not enjoy, but are required to complete to fulfill the school's curriculum or basic studies requirement (Lawhon, 1998). Thus one of the main differences between undergraduate and graduate and/or professional school is the level of depth and focus of study.

**TRANSITION TO LIFE OUTSIDE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

A great myth exists that all seniors are ready for graduation and their impending transitions. A student's state of readiness for a successful transition is not realized simply by the timing of graduation. In fact, many seniors are unclear about their goals, confused by the graduate school and job search processes, and worried about their futures (Smith & Gast, 1998). Adjusting to a new job is only part of the transition college students will make when they graduate. Upon leaving the college campus environment,
students suddenly may realize how different life is now that they are not constantly surrounded by hundreds of people of approximately their same age and pursuing similar goals. For some graduates, entering the real world can be a tremendous adjustment because this is the first time they are responsible solely to themselves. Part of the transition includes focusing on repaying debts and other financial obligations, balancing work and family (but taking school out of the equation), as well as mentally preparing themselves to leave the higher education environment.

**RESPONSIBILITY FOR EASING THE TRANSITION**

**College and University Responsibility**

Beyond conferring academic skills to students, colleges and universities have a responsibility to prepare the whole student for the process of leaving the institution. College and university programs for graduating seniors can take many forms depending on the students' needs. Advising and counseling seniors through the job search process, providing some type of closure on the college experience, motivating alumni relationships, and evaluating experiences are some of the responsibilities institutions have in easing the transitioning process. Campus career counseling services are unique in that they have a strong linkage to employers, and have a responsibility for aiding the transition from college to the workplace (Holton, 1998). This critical link between the college and potential employers, if utilized, can be one of the most effective ways for seniors to find employment. Incorporating career planning into the educational experience increases a student's level of preparation and understanding about the job search process. Career services can assist students in many ways throughout their time on campus. Administering personality inventories early on helps students clarify their interest and direction of study, offering internships and co-op relationships with local employers offers students actual work experience, and hosting job fairs and on-campus interviews brings students face to face with potential job opportunities. In addition,
career services offices can provide feedback to academic departments on the kinds of skills employers are looking for in students.

There are many ways to bring closure to a student's collegiate experience. The senior year, depending on the academic major, can be a time when students are engaged in senior seminars, portfolio reviews, senior projects, theses, exit examinations, departmental reviews, and capstone classes. These various experiences allow seniors to apply their knowledge, and demonstrate their skills and competence in the field they are about to enter. Beyond departmental graduation requirements, a potentially impactful closure activity could be a university-wide required class for graduating seniors parallel to entry-level University 101 classes (often taken as an orientation to the university when students are first-year students). Class discussion and assignments could revolve around the transition experience and self-assessment, as well as analysis, evaluation of, and reflection on their undergraduate experience.

Motivating alumni involvement and contribution is another key component of senior year programs at colleges and universities. However, development of school pride and appreciation should not begin during the student's final year on campus. According to Johnson and Eckel (1998), most students who graduate know very little about how or why alumni involvement is crucial or their options for continuing a close relationship with their alma mater(s) after graduation. In addition, faculty and staff fail to see that today's seniors are tomorrow's alumni, and that fostering their commitment to the institution during their senior year will have a direct effect on the level of commitment they have after their graduation.

While alumni financial donations are central to the financial health of the institution (Johnson & Eckel, 1998), other benefits to the institution include alumni resources, talents, and positive reflection of the university and its values to the greater public. In order to cultivate an involved group of alumni from each senior class, it is necessary for colleges and universities to start informing students about an alumni connection early.
First, it is essential for students to understand why they should be involved and how they can fulfill their roles. Second, alumni activities should be inclusive of current students, full of tradition, and instill pride in seniors so that they want to be a part of the group. Finally, commencement should be an event that cements the connection, as it is possibly the student's last formal involvement with the university.

### Student Responsibility

Of course, a certain amount of the responsibility for a smooth transition rests with the students themselves. Colleges and universities can offer career services, job fairs, internship opportunities, capstone classes, and alumni involvement activities for students, but it ultimately is the responsibility of each individual student to take advantage of these resources during his or her senior year. While it is impossible to force students to seek out services that will make the transition easier, having them available certainly is a strong first step.

### Employers' Responsibility

It may be easy to assume that workplaces can do more to prepare their new hires for the transition into their companies. However, is this really an employer's job? If the point of education is to give employees skills and competencies so they can work, if that is not happening, is it not the institution's responsibility to change? At the end of the 1980s, college advisers and faculty began hearing criticisms of their students' skills and workplace competencies from employers (Gardner, 1998). Unfortunately, some of the skills that were missing can not be taught or gained in the classroom setting. This is where employers can play a role in easing college seniors' transition into workplace environments. Learning outside the classroom can take many forms; internships, cooperative experiences, and independent studies are among the wide range of activities that students can receive credit for while pursuing their degrees. Businesses that offer internship experiences to college students play a part in helping them to
develop essential skills for work after graduation. The responsibility for holding the student accountable, however, rests with the university. According to Gardner (1998), faculty can exert influence by setting rigorous standards and evaluation criteria for internships; an internship that merely allows a student to file papers offers little expert practice and should not be viewed as acceptable.

CONCLUSION

Through orientation programs, first-year seminar classes and other activities, first-year students typically receive a great deal of attention during their initial experiences on college campuses. Four or five years later, the same students typically receive minimal attention. For the most part, the unique needs of seniors at colleges and universities have been neglected and even ignored. This may be a result of the fact that colleges assume seniors are the least "needy" group on campus. College seniors have survived the shaky periods and most likely will successfully graduate from colleges and universities. However, as has been made clear throughout this article, seniors have unique needs related to the transition they are about to undergo. The potential for difficulty during the transition from college to career or from undergraduate to graduate school deserves serious consideration and attention from the colleges and universities. As discussed, there are many steps institutions can take to make the transition easier on graduating seniors.

Why should colleges and universities allocate resources for easing this transition? There are three main reasons why the needs of seniors should be a focus for colleges and universities. First, seniors have high expectations of their lives after college. For many, the main reason they attended a college or university was to prepare them for a career and to increase their earning potential. Second, graduating seniors are the school's ambassadors to employers, the general public, and potential future students.
Third, the dedication, appreciation, and donations provided by alumni will help keep the institution funded in the future.

The outcome of any undergraduate experience should be more than just a framed diploma. Colleges and universities can and must intentionally and successfully influence and enhance outcomes in a variety of specific ways (Gardner, 1998). Institutions of higher education to have an obligation to help students complete the educational process and enjoy a smooth transition from campus life to life after college.

REFERENCES


*Heather Shea ('00) is the Program Director for the Durrell Center at Colorado State University.*