

SY@HPU - Sophomore Year @ High Point University

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Abstract

High Point University prides itself on being a leader in holistic education—imaginative, resourceful, and diligent in equipping students with the necessary tools for lives of success and significance. Central to this vision for holistic education is thinking critically about major transitions common to college students, transitions from teenager to young adult, dependent to independent, and student to lifelong learner. As college students grapple with who they are and discover their places in this world, an exploration that often occurs during the sophomore year, social and self-awareness are critical to students' personal and professional development. The sophomore year experience, SY@HPU, is a program designed to help sophomores answer the question, "Who will I become?" through a series of sophomore-themed events and social activities, and a one credit self-development course, lab section, or small group meeting. Through SY@HPU, students will have the opportunity to form meaningful relationships with others across the University, to examine how their strengths and values contribute to their greater vocations, and to explore the ways their liberal arts education will enhance their personal and professional lives before and after graduation.

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin wrote in Poor Richard's Almanac, "There are three Things extremely hard, Steel, a Diamond and to know one's self" (195). The maxim "Know Thyself" has been a popular proverb since the time of the Seven Sages of Greece in the 6th century BC. The college years, especially in a holistic learning environment such as High Point University, are a time for students to diligently pursue this maxim, to search their depths and uncover their strengths and limitations, values and beliefs, interests and passions. "Who will I become?" should be the question every student strives to answer during his or her college years. It is a question that High Point University is poised and eager to help students answer with a dedicated and deliberate approach to educating and shaping the whole student. As stated by William Sullivan in the Winter 2014 issue of *Liberal Education*, "A major discovery, or rediscovery, of our time is that an education that matters—an education that enhances capacities and expands outlooks—is one that engages the whole student...It has also become clear that the essential basis for both academic success and personal resilience—the "grit" that sustains energy and direction in life—hinges on finding a sense of meaning and purpose." (20)

Throughout the college experience "transition" is a defining word. Students are in constant transition: from high school to college, from teenager to young adult, from dependent to independent, from receiver to giver, from memorizer to creator, and ultimately from student to lifelong learner. The freshman year begins with an introduction to academic and intellectual life

and exposure to a broad range of topics, scholarly questions, and perspectives. Students are engaged with the concept of “Big Questions” in First Year Seminars, courses designed to facilitate the high school to college intellectual transition. In the President’s Seminar on Life Skills, they are introduced to character building skills, goal setting, leadership fundamentals, and the eventual college to “real world” transition. Each student is connected with a Freshman Success Coach, an individual who mentors and advises the student in all things associated with the college life transition. In addition, many initiatives exist to help students become better acquainted with one another and High Point University, including the Freshman Day on the Ropes Course, the Leadership Fellows Program, the Media Fellows Program, freshman dormitories, and Learning Communities. Over the past five years, 76.9% of the freshman class return to High Point University for their sophomore year; with the launching of several of the aforementioned programs in Fall 2013, this percentage will likely increase and more freshmen will consider HPU their home for their next three years.

The freshman year is filled with opportunities for students to begin the transitions outlined previously and start shaping their answers to “Who will I become?” The sophomore year should continue to assist students with self-discovery by providing learning opportunities, experiences, and purposeful connections with other students and faculty members. The second highest drop in retention (after the freshman year) occurs at the sophomore to junior year transition (Tobolowsky 2008). On average, 85.1% of sophomores return for their junior year. While this percentage is 8% higher than the retention rate of freshmen, 95% of juniors return for their senior year. During the sophomore year, students typically experience more demanding coursework and academic schedules, feel pressure to choose a major which will lead to a career, begin considering study abroad and internship opportunities, and have to search for their places socially in the larger university community. In addition, as the transition from teenager to young adult continues, they become more independent from parents as they search for their own identities. For these reasons, the sophomore year is a time of insecurity and confusion, and is characterized by feelings of being lost and isolated. It was first termed “the sophomore slump” in 1956 by Mervin Freedman (Gahagan & Stuart, 2006).

Many colleges and universities seek to address this important transition and build up their sophomore students with programs, courses, or activities to increase students’ awareness of themselves and their personal and professional development. The S’mores program (2014) at Rhodes College provides sophomores with a yearlong calendar of events including workshops, information sessions, and social functions designed to help sophomores “stay connected and be successful”, and ends with a “Half Way to Graduation Celebration”. Butler University (2014) has “Year 2 at BU” which, like the program at Rhodes, focuses on the social and the formative aspects with a sophomore picnic, a volunteer fair, and a networking night. The GPS Sophomore Year Experience program at Belmont University (2014) primarily consists of one-on-one coaching sessions, but also includes sophomore-only housing and seminars centered on

sophomores (“Sophomore Experience at Belmont”). Emory University offers the “Second Year at Emory” (2014) program that has dedicated sophomore housing, a Second Year kick-off program, and social and scholastic events that foster connections among sophomores, faculty, academic advisors, career center staff, and alumni. Finally, the “College-to-Career” course series at Wake Forest consists of 1.5 credit courses that address student self-knowledge, the link between majors and potential careers, internship applications, interview skills, and job searching. One course is taken each year of the student’s time at Wake Forest, to assist them with changes that occur during a particular year. The sophomore programs above are only a select few of those that exist, the majority of which are sponsored by multiple departments and offices including Student Life, Residence Life, Academic Services, Career Services, Leadership Programs, Study Abroad, Religious Life, and the Alumni Association, to name a few.

At High Point University, students at any juncture of their college careers could join over 90 organizations, including student government, academic clubs, honors societies, special interest groups (such as the Diversity Club or the Visual Art and Design Club), religious organizations, service organizations, athletic teams, or Greek Life. For those involved, all of these organizations offer students character building experiences and a network of social support as they transition to young adulthood; however, none target students specifically in the sophomore year, an integral time period for growth. In addition, students typically choose a major in the sophomore year, and though Career Services offers excellent resources to assist students by helping them learn about their strengths, interests, and personalities, in 2013/2014 only 15.3% of sophomores and 6.7% of freshmen visited Career & Internship Services.¹ This lack of self-observation and reflection goes hand-in-hand with the approximately 33% of HPU juniors who have had two different majors and 8% who have had three.² “Who will I become?” is the question we want our students to answer while at High Point University; to answer this, our students need to learn the skills of self-analysis and reflection, and how to use them to make deliberate and valuable choices in their lives. Sophomore year is an optimal time to engage in this introspection, as students begin to make choices that will shape their remaining course of study at college and ultimately their course of lifelong study and career. This white paper sets forth three options for a program that will provide an organized and deliberate sophomore year experience for our students, better preparing them to lead examined lives of significance, an integral part of High Point University’s mission statement.

Sophomore year experience description

The Sophomore Year experience, SY@HPU, is launched in the summer before students’ sophomore year with a required summer reading assignment relevant to personal growth and collective meaning. In the fall, they are welcomed on campus during move-in weekend (possibly

¹ Data from 2013 and 2014 Graduate Exit Survey.

² Data from the Office of Research and Planning. Does not include “undeclared” as a major.

Sunday or Monday night), with a social event they can anticipate and a way to reconnect with friends from freshman year. This kickoff event could take the form of a dinner, an informal barbeque, a gathering at the ropes course, or other social activity, and the Resident Directors and Resident Assistants with the Office of Student Life could require attendance as part of their hall programs. The director of SY@HPU (discussed in a later section) could speak about the transitions and challenges faced by sophomores and the growth they will experience this year, as part of the Sophomore Year experience. In addition, President Qubein and Provost Carroll could address students about how this year is an important one in their lives, as they delve deeply into themselves, asking questions about who they are, what they hold valuable in life, and who they want to become. The President could also present the link between the President's Seminar for Freshmen, this Sophomore Year Seminar, and the President's Seminar for Seniors, exciting students about the years to come at HPU.

The committee envisions three potential frameworks for the Sophomore Year experience, which would be a requirement for all sophomores:

1. a traditional one credit course delivered either online or face-to-face (meeting once per week) during the Fall semester. This course could take advantage of the social and academic connections made in the freshman year learning communities; sections could be organized by topic, such as English, health science, philosophy, science, etc., and taught by a professor in the field. This approach would allow students to connect with other students and faculty members who share their interests. Course sections could be as small or as large as the number of available faculty.
2. an added lab component of self-development as part of an Ethics course (which is currently a general education requirement) to be taken during the Fall or Spring semester. This Ethics self-development lab component would meet for one or two hours weekly, similar to a typical lab section, and would be taught by either the Ethics course professor or another facilitator. Ethics would become a required sophomore year course, much like English 1103 and First Year Seminar FYS 1000, and would feel like a Sophomore Year Seminar.
3. a half-credit course which consists of small group monthly or bi-monthly meetings to be taken both in the Fall and Spring semesters. These small group meetings, would be guided by a facilitator (perhaps a faculty member or other qualified individual), would be no larger than ten students, and could be similar in style to a book club meeting. Students would complete assignments or readings and be prepared to discuss these at each meeting.

Regardless of course structure and for the benefit of all current and prospective HPU students, a website would be created with resources to assist students with self-discovery. The website would include assessments for students to discern strengths and values, recommended books and literature emphasizing vocational discernment, video interviews with faculty from every major discussing the major and potential career paths and perhaps their journeys into their

vocations (to be added over time), and informational interviews with HPU alumni in various fields regarding their paths through college and transitions into the working world (also to be added over time). In addition, as part of the course students would be required to attend events throughout the semester, including workshops, seminars, public talks, or panel discussions. Events could focus on knowing one's self, vocational discernment, paths followed by well-known and successful individuals, or success stories of HPU alumni, providing students with techniques on how to lead a well-examined life and examples of individuals who do.

In all three frameworks, students will:

- Gain self-awareness by identifying strengths, limitations, interests, and unique gifts;
- Value how a liberal arts education impacts and enhances their personal and professional lives during and after college;
- Recognize vocation as the development of one's self for and beyond career;
- Connect with others across the university community to form meaningful relationships.

Example activities in the course could include the following:

- Completion of the Strong Interest Inventory and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test;
- Potential readings:
 - Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*
 - Allison Jay, *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*
 - Robert Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader*;
- Attendance at selected events, similar to those mentioned previously;
- Written work reflecting on who they are now and who they hope to become, and a later paper evaluating the impact of their new self-knowledge.

Finally, social events could be organized for sophomores throughout the year, providing them with a sense of community independent of their other identities on campus. The SY@HPU experience could culminate in the spring with a halfway-to-graduation celebration only for sophomores to celebrate their successful transitions to this point in their lives.

Creating this SY@HPU program would require the support of multiple individuals, departments and offices on campus, including faculty members, Career Services, HPU alumni, Student Life, Freshman Success, Provost Carroll and the Office of Academic Affairs, and President Qubein. A faculty member from every academic department would be asked to provide video interviews, facilitate networking with HPU alumni in their discipline, or teach course sections. Career Services would assist faculty and students with activities throughout the course and networking with HPU alumni, who would be invited to campus to speak and interact with current students.

The Office of Student Life, including Resident Directors and Assistants, would recruit sophomores to attend the kickoff event at the start of the fall semester and assist with other sophomore social events. Freshman Success currently serves as academic advisors to all freshmen and undeclared sophomores; these coaches would continue guiding undeclared students. Since this course strongly links EXP 1101 and EXP 4999, President Qubein's explicit mention of all three courses in his presentations to students, parents, and prospective students would highlight the holistic nature of HPU's educational experience, and the guiding role HPU plays in each student's quest to answer "Who will I become?"

An SY@HPU administrator would be needed to direct the program and coordinate with offices and departments across the university. The Leadership Program Administrator or head of the Learning Communities are two potential individuals who may be a good fit to lead SY@HPU, as they are both currently working with freshmen and could guide them into the sophomore year. Additionally, a Center for Teaching and Learning would be an invaluable resource for SY@HPU, assisting faculty with mentoring and teaching students about vocational discernment, designing activities that provoke deep classroom discussion, and creating writing prompts that engender student self-reflection. It would also nurture stimulating and encouraging discussion among faculty about successful classroom techniques to motivate students in general education courses. This Center would require a Director and staff.

Assessing the Efficacy of SY@HPU

To assess the efficacy of SY@HPU, multiple surveys would be given to students including the Student Satisfaction Inventory and the National Survey of Student Engagement. An attitudinal survey would also be given, prior to and after the course, to assess students' changes in attitude and knowledge about themselves, their major choices, and their future career paths. Retention rates will be tracked as well as the number of major changes for students after taking the course.

Conclusion

Institutional data from multiple sources, including Graduate Exit Surveys and the QEP Topic Selection Survey, were evaluated as well as current research on the evolution of college students. Many schools across the country have recognized the importance of the sophomore year, and best practices include the establishment of programs that may include second year courses, workshops, seminars, weekend retreats, sophomore housing, social events for sophomores, sophomore dinners with faculty, or short summer residential programs. The SY@HPU program does not have to be limited to the ideas presented in this paper, and could encompass any or all of these activities. This program's main objective is to provide a purposeful sophomore year, rife with opportunities for students to connect their academic and social experiences to personal growth. Further, after students have made progress answering the question "Who will I become?" and selecting a major field of study, the model could be

extended into the junior year, with a course to assist students with internship applications, research experiences, and job interviews.

References and Additional Resources

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