

# Engaging Second-Year Students in Transformational Learning Experiences

Elizabeth L Black



*First-year programs alone are not enough to create the supportive campus environment needed for student success and engagement. Ohio State University undertook an ambitious program to engage second-year students in transformational learning experiences; librarians are multi-faceted partners in this campus-wide initiative. This paper describes the challenges facing second-year students and how the Ohio State program is designed to support students, notes the librarian roles within the Ohio State program and explores connections of threshold concepts identified in the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education to study abroad, leadership, internships, service-learning, undergraduate research and artistic/creative endeavors.*



Engagement is a key ingredient for student success at all class ranks. Recent literature describes best practices and programs that institutions should offer. But a list of programs is not enough. In a large-scale study of strong-performing colleges and universities, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt report that quality initiatives that are complementary and synergistic help to create success-oriented cultures and transformational learning environments.<sup>1</sup> It requires working across boundaries and toward the common goal of student success.

Increasingly higher education institutions are realizing that a student's second year in college is critically important. Recent research reports suggest that traditionally aged sophomores are in a period of transition similar to that which many experience at middle age.<sup>2</sup> As institutions increase focus on first year students, second year students report feeling abandoned by their universities. Furthermore, while the first year is a critical time for retention efforts, a 2002

study by Berkner, He and Forrest found that at least as many students leave after the second year as the first.<sup>3</sup>

College and university librarians are partners in the teaching and learning enterprise of higher education and as such have an important role in furthering student success efforts. This paper will provide a context for librarian roles in supporting student engagement and transformational learning, describe an ambitious second-year program at Ohio State University and the multiple librarian contributions to the creation and implementation of Ohio State's Second-year Transformational Experience Program (STEP). Lastly, this paper will draw connections between the threshold concepts identified in *the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* and the high-impact educational practices selected by Ohio State's program: study abroad, leadership, internships, service-learning, undergraduate research and artistic/creative endeavors.

## What is Student Engagement and Transformational Learning?

There are two factors contributing to student engagement. The first is the time and effort students put into their studies and the other activities that lead to the outcomes tied to student success measures. The second is the ways in which the institution allocates resources and organizes learning opportunities and services. While some would argue that colleges and universities have no influence over student effort, research shows that if the aspects of the college experience are arranged in ways to encourage student participation and increased effort, students do put forth the increased effort required.<sup>4</sup>

The National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) groups effective educational practices into five clusters: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interactions with faculty members, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments.

Jack Mezirow introduced the concept of transformative learning within the context of adult education in the late 1970s. He defines it as “learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change.”<sup>5</sup> Frames, as predispositions with cognitive, affective and striving dimensions, filter and shape a person’s experience of the world.

A transformational learning environment is characterized by (a) promoting character education; (b) balancing challenge and support in developmentally appropriate ways; (c) encouraging students to make connections and meaning; and (d) providing accessible mentoring.<sup>6</sup>

## The Traditional Second-Year College Student

Molly Schaller led several studies exploring the developmental challenges facing sophomores based on the theories of psychosocial and intellectual development articulated by Perry and Chickering. Building on the framework of transition theory, Schaller described

her findings in a theoretical framework published in 2010 and summarized here.

Schaller notes that while the entire college experience is a time of transition, or multiple transitions for students, the second year is a particularly critical time for identity development. Margolis likened the identity crisis of the sophomore year of college to that found in middle age.<sup>7</sup> He suggested, and Schreiner confirmed, that second-year students experienced increased academic and interpersonal challenges at the same time institutional support systems decrease.<sup>8</sup> These things push students toward transition.

The first stage Schaller identifies is random exploration. This stage occurs primarily during the first year of college as students explore all that is available to them in their new environment. Often during the summer following the first year students begin to make sense of these experiences as their self-awareness grows and they enter their second year in the next phase, focused exploration. Students are more conscientious in this stage as they actively seek insight into relationships, future and self. They are aware that they are in between childhood and adulthood; they begin to question the choices they have made thus far. This is an uncomfortable yet important stage. The longer a student stays here the deeper the exploration; if students leave this stage too quickly, their exploration can be too shallow and leave them vulnerable to external pressures on key upcoming life decisions.<sup>9</sup>

It is during sophomore year that many students need to have declared a major and make other significant life decisions. As choices are tested and reflected upon during the focused exploration stage, students move to the third stage of tentative choices. This stage occurs generally during the sophomore or junior year. There is still some doubt, self-reflection, and room for later change to these decisions, however, hence the tentative label. The transition completes with the commitment stage. This fourth stage is when new beginnings emerge in all three areas: relationships, future and self. Students have more confidence in the decisions they have made and put forth energy to pursue their goals. This final stage is where sophomores

are headed; most will not reach it during their second year.

### **Designing and Piloting the Second-year Transformational Experience Program**

Findings from Ohio State's participation in NSSE and local research indicated that while Ohio State had made great strides in improving the student experience there were gaps that required attention. A key concern was the finding that 50% of graduating seniors reported never interacting with faculty outside of coursework.<sup>10</sup> It was also shown that students who live on-campus for two years have higher graduation and 2-year retention rates than students who did not live on campus their first two years.<sup>11</sup>

In 2011, Ohio State began actively exploring a 2-year on-campus residency requirement. The following year, planning began in earnest on the program that would ensure that living on campus a second year was a valuable experience for students. Two campus committees worked in tandem to design a program that would emphasize interaction with faculty and peers, participation in campus events, and demonstration of the institution's commitment to each student.

At the time of this writing, STEP is in its second pilot year and recruitment is well underway for a third pilot year with yet more students. In the 2012-15 academic year (2<sup>nd</sup> pilot year), the program included approximately 1,200 students and 78 faculty dividing into small groups, known as cohorts, which include up to 20 students mentored by one faculty member. Up to 5 cohorts combine to form a single house for the occasional larger group meeting. Cohorts meet weekly during autumn semester and bi-weekly during spring semester in residence hall common areas. These meetings take a variety of forms as members get to know one another and themselves, ultimately forming community. Students are also required to attend four co-curricular programs, one of which must be financial literacy. At the end of their STEP year students submit a proposal for an experience they select

and/or design connected to one of six experiential areas: study abroad, leadership, internships, service-learning, undergraduate research, and artistic/creative endeavors. Students are awarded up to \$2000 in fellowship toward this experience. The six experiences were selected and designed according to the effective educational practices described and measured by NSSE.

### **Librarian Involvement in STEP**

A librarian from University Libraries at Ohio State has been involved with STEP since mid-2012 in a variety of ways. First, she served on the program planning committee that designed the program's overall structure and oversight, the program name, recommended the six experiences and their requirements, and designed the co-curricular program component.

Throughout the program pilot years, librarians are involved with STEP through both the faculty and co-curricular aspects of the program. This is rare; an outgrowth of a librarian's unique role on campus in both the classroom (curricular) and co-curricular realms. Even within the collaborative program management team, which consists of both academic affairs and student affairs personnel, there is a division; the faculty mentors and their work with cohorts is coordinated by the academic affairs staff and the co-curricular workshops are coordinated by the student affairs staff. Most individuals on campus who are involved with the program work with only one side or the other.

As members of the university faculty, two librarians are serving as STEP faculty mentors during the 2014-15 academic year. They each have active cohorts of between 14 and 17 students, which meet regularly. One faculty mentor described the experience as similar to teaching a for-credit course yet more rewarding because of the program's emphasis on self-awareness and relationship building in a flexibly structured and student-focused environment. Both librarians have volunteered to continue for the 2015-16 academic year.

Library workshops have a strong presence in the co-curricular program component. These workshops

range from more traditional library research skills themes, such as “How to Find Resources and Discover Special Collections”, to ones on emerging areas such as “Students as Authors and Creators: Share your ideas, Know your rights” and “Seeking Multiple Stories: Information Skills for Global Citizenship.”

### Student Engagement, Transformative Learning and Threshold Concepts

Threshold concepts, transformative learning and student engagement are intertwined. *The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* describes threshold concepts as concepts that produce transformation within the learner<sup>12</sup>; these concepts challenge the learner’s frames and therefore her experience of the world. In order for a student to be so challenged, he must be engaged.

Multiple domains or ways of knowing are involved in all three. In order to be engaged and transformed, students’ affective, social and cognitive aspects must be included. *The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* uses dispositions to describe these companions to the knowledge practices connected to each threshold concept.

The author brainstormed ways in which the threshold concepts described in *The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* might be practiced through the six experiential options in the Ohio State second-year program.

### Artistic and Creative Endeavors

- *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*: Exploring creativity requires developing and maintaining an open mind.
- *Information Creation as a Process*: Artistic and creative experiences often result in a product and will involve decisions about the form that product will take.
- *Information has Value*: In exploration-focused artistic and creative experiences, the educational value of a diverse range of information is a key element.
- *Research as Inquiry*: Experiences focused

on creative and artistic expression have the potential to stimulate intellectual curiosity and to introduce students to new methods of investigation.

- *Scholarship as Conversation*: Through artistic and creative experiences students are potentially exposed to new forms of scholarship and different ways to give voice to ideas and information.
- *Searching as Strategic Exploration*: Artistic and creative experiences provide opportunities for students to experience new sources of information, to consult with experts, and to practice persistence.
- Internships
- *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*: In the workplace the power dynamics change and students are no longer working within student-teacher contexts; instead they are interacting with co-workers and supervisors. The context of what is authoritative is tilted as the peer-review journal article likely no longer has the power it had in the university context.
- *Information Creation as a Process*: The internship experience exposes students to new types of information packaging and to the differences between the academic and workplace contexts in the assessment of information.
- *Information has Value*: The internship experience provides students with the opportunity to participate in different ways of accessing information and to see how information is used to influence in the work place.
- *Research as Inquiry*: Key to an internship experience is applied inquiry as students seek to use the information they gained in the classroom to answer work place questions.
- *Scholarship as Conversation*: Internships provide students the opportunity to observe and hopefully participate in learning conversations within a work place environment.

- *Searching as Strategic Exploration:* Students will be exposed to different types of sources and have the opportunity for real-world situations to inspire persistence.

## Leadership

- *Authority is Constructed and Contextual:* Leadership experiences led themselves to practical and concrete explorations of authority as students seek to lead and influence a group or a process.
- *Information Creation as a Process:* Most leadership experiences will provide opportunities to use and create information in a variety of forms as the students seek to learn about and practice influence over a group or process.
- *Information has Value:* Leadership contexts lend themselves to the use of information as a means of influence.
- *Research as Inquiry:* Often in a leadership experience, students are attempting to solve a problem they have observed; this requires articulating the problem and gathering, assessing and synthesizing information toward a solution.
- *Scholarship as Conversation:* Exploring new leadership roles provides the opportunity to try on new perspectives and to engage in diverse conversations.
- *Searching as Strategic Exploration:* Leadership opportunities offer students the chance to engage with different types of information sources, including individuals and groups.
- Service-Learning and Community Service
- *Authority is Constructed and Contextual:* Authority and power are often unexpected topics in community service. Students frequently start these as ways to “do good” and to “give back” to the community. Underneath these ideas are power and privilege, which add complexity to the context of service and can lead to the question “who is the authority?”

- *Information Creation as a Process:* The real-world context of service-learning and community service experiences give students authentic practice in assessing the fit between an information product’s packaging and the information need.
- *Information has Value:* Service-learning and community service experiences frequently encourage students to confront previously unobserved privilege in the voices that are amplified and those that are marginalized.
- *Research as Inquiry:* The real-world societal problems confronted in service-learning and community service experiences stimulate intellectual curiosity and deeper engagement with information.
- *Scholarship as Conversation:* Students engage with complex societal questions and have the opportunity to hear underrepresented voices and competing claims through service-learning and community service experiences.
- *Searching as Strategic Exploration:* The real-world challenges in service-learning and community service experiences inspire persistence in students and provide opportunities to engage with new information sources.

## Study Abroad

- *Authority is Constructed and Contextual:* By entering a different country and culture, students are confronted with the power of context. Much that is taken for granted and authoritative is different and therefore students must learn to recognize new clues to authority.
- *Information Creation as a Process:* The new environment can make the information creation processes and formats more visible and provide access to new formats.
- *Information has Value:* While studying abroad, students often experience differences in the dissemination of information or societal impacts on the value of different types of information.

- *Research as Inquiry*: Students intellectual curiosity is stimulated by the new environment and culture encountered during study abroad experiences.
- *Scholarship as Conversation*: Exposure to and interaction with new perspectives are key to study abroad experiences.
- *Searching as Strategic Exploration*: Through the study abroad experience students are encouraged to be flexible and to become familiar with new sources and processes for finding, evaluating and using information.

### Undergraduate Research

- *Authority is Constructed and Contextual*: While participating in undergraduate research, students will experience authority within the context of the discipline. They will look to their research mentors and others for assistance in navigating authority within the research project.
- *Information Creation as a Process*: Students involved in undergraduate research experiences have the opportunity to work through multiple layers of the information creation process from idea, to inquiry, to understanding, to articulation, and finally to communicating the new information through a research poster.
- *Information has Value*: Within the context of an independent research experience, students are producing their own valuable information. As part of the dissemination of their product, usually a research poster or paper, they will make decisions around copyright and licensing.
- *Research as Inquiry*: The key to the undergraduate research experience is articulating a research question and exploring it in-depth under the guidance of a research mentor.
- *Scholarship as Conversation*: Most undergraduate research experiences will include placing their inquiry in the context of those

who have come before; these students are beginning to engage in the scholarly conversation.

- *Searching as Strategic Exploration*: Working with their own research question inspires persistence in the students and through their work with experts, such as their research mentor and librarians, they are introduced to new search tools and strategies.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, the goal is for students to graduate and go on to lead successful lives. What does a successful life look like? In 2014, the Gallup organization and Purdue University joined forces to explore this question.<sup>13</sup> Using the workplace engagement and well-being work done previously by Gallup, they surveyed over 30,000 college graduates from across the United States to learn which factors from a graduate's college experience predicted workplace engagement and well-being. Surprisingly, the selectivity of the school's admission didn't matter. Instead, aligned with the student engagement and transformative learning research by others, what mattered was being actively involved in deep and / or sustained ways, such as in a project that lasted more than a semester, in extracurricular activities, or in an internship or job. Just as important as this engagement was feeling supported by having a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their dreams, a professor who made them excited about learning, or having someone, usually a professor, who cared about them as a person.

The whole student matters. These efforts at student engagement require faculty and staff engagement. Librarians are in a unique and powerful position. We have both faculty and staff roles in colleges and universities, no matter what our official status in our organization might be. We see students both within and outside of the classroom. Let's leverage this power to be the mentors and people who care.

*The Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* helps us to do this by integrating dispositions with the skills and knowledge required to be

information literate. It connects information literacy to lifelong learning and continued engagement with one's environment.

## Notes

1. George D. Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt, and Associates, eds. *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions that Matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
2. Molly A. Schaller, "Understanding the Impact of the Second Year of College," in *Helping sophomores succeed*, ed. Mary Stuart Hunter, Barbara F. Tobolowsky, John N. Gardner, Scott E. Evenbeck, Jerry A. Pettengale, Molly A. Schaller, Laurie A. Schreiner, and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 13-29.
3. Schaller, "Understanding the Impact", 16.
4. Kuh, *Student Success in College*, 9.
5. Jack Mezirow. "Transformative Learning Theory," in *Transformative Learning in Practice: Insights from Community, Workplace, and Higher Education*, ed. Jack Mezirow, Edward W. Taylor, and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 22.
6. Jennifer A. Lindholm, "Spirituality, Meaning Making, and the Sophomore-Year Experience," in *Helping sophomores succeed*, ed. Mary Stuart Hunter, Barbara F. Tobolowsky, John N. Gardner, Scott E. Evenbeck, Jerry A. Pettengale, Molly A. Schaller, Laurie A. Schreiner, and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 206.
7. Molly A. Schaller, "College Sophomores: the Journey into Self", in *Helping sophomores succeed*, ed. Mary Stuart Hunter, Barbara F. Tobolowsky, John N. Gardner, Scott E. Evenbeck, Jerry A. Pettengale, Molly A. Schaller, Laurie A. Schreiner, and Associates (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 67.
8. Laurie A. Schreiner, Sharyn Slavin Miller, Tamera L. Pullins, and Troy L. Seppelt, "Beyond Sophomore Survival", in *Thriving in Transitions: A Research-Based Approach to College Student Success*, ed. Laurie A. Schreiner, Michelle C. Louis, and Denise D. Nelson (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2012), 111-136.
9. Molly A. Schaller, "Wandering and Wondering: Traversing the Uneven Terrain of the Second College Year," *About Campus* 10, no. 3 (2005): 17-24, doi:10.1002/abc.131.
10. "The Ohio State University Means and Frequencies Report," National Study of Student Engagement, August 2010, <http://oaa.osu.edu/irp/surveys/nsse.php>.
11. "Program Overview: STEP Second-year Transformational Experience Program," Ohio State University Office of Student Life, accessed February 4, 2015, <http://step.osu.edu/program-overview/>.
12. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," Association of College and Research Libraries, January 16, 2015, <http://acrl.org/standards/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Framework-MW15-Board-Docs.pdf>.
13. "Great Jobs, Great Lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report," Gallup, May 2014, <http://products.gallup.com/168857/gallup-purdue-index-inaugural-national-report.aspx>.