Freshman Students' Self-Awareness and Adaptability to College Life

Mary Anne B. Tesoro
De La Salle University Manila
mary.anne.tesoro@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: Transition to college is marked by complex challenges in emotional, social and academic adjustment. Some students look forward to this transition while others are ill-prepared for these changes, partly because college and high school have different standards and expectations. This concept paper attempts to explore on college students' self-awareness and adaptability, particularly looking at the freshman students, with the goal to improve their ability to cope positively with the challenges of college life. Moreover, this paper investigates how these freshman students will be able to enhance their capacity to integrate resiliency skills, attitudes, behaviors and deal effectively with daily tasks and challenges that are brought about by the transition to college and the demands of academics. The program intends to utilize the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as a framework. The CASEL emphasizes the use of evidence-based programs which helps in developing positive results and prevents problem behavior in students (CASEL, 2008). The intended program out of this conceptual paper will employ module development and use of psychoeducation sessions. The program being developed in this concept paper may become relevant to counseling practitioners as reference in providing other appropriate interventions to assist the college students adapt to collegiate life.

Key Words: self-awareness; college transition; adaptability; social and emotional learning; evidence-based

1. INTRODUCTION

College is an exciting time of life. It provides countless opportunities for growth and an accumulation of rich interpersonal experiences. Yet, transition to college is marked by complex challenges in emotional, social and academic adjustment (Gerdes, H. et al 1994). Students need to simultaneously adapt to college academic rigor and the new social responsibilities (Holmstrom, L. et. al, 2002). Some look forward to this transition and are eager to experience more freedom and adventure. Others may be enthusiastic initially and later on discover that the actual experience falls short of their expectations. Venezia and Kirst state that many students are ill-prepared for these changes, partly because college and high school have different standards and expectations (2003). For some, students find ways to adapt to college transition constructively, whereas others feel overwhelmed and unable to effectively meet the demands of their new role. No matter what the expectations, positive life changes produce stress which can lead to varying emotions that are typical

and part of the normal developmental transition to college (Friedlander, L, et. al, 2007). The same study purports that the difficulties associated with the transition to college may lead to decreased academic performance and increased psychological distress (2007). Other researches similarly confirmed that majority of those who drop out or fail from higher education courses do so in their first year and as a result, the freshman year has been referred to as a make or break year (Bourner, T. et al as cited in Johnston, V., 1997). They often struggle with making new friends, adjusting to academic demands and the requirement for self-discipline that come with independent learning (O'Connor, M. et al, 2007). Other researches, such as that of Hseih, have stated that personal and academic problems are influential but individual differences affect how students respond to the challenges they face (2007). Likewise, in a study conducted by Sparkman, it concluded that predictors of success in college do not depend only on high grade point average but to non-traditional variables as well such as the potential effects of emotional intelligence on a student's ability to persist (2012). Although many successfully transition to college, others experience long-term emotional maladjustment and depression, which may, in turn, negatively affect college performance (Gall, T. et. al., 2000). This context has led to the development of this concept paper on college students' self-awareness and adaptability with the goal to improve the students' ability to cope with the challenges of college life. It, likewise, attempts to discover how these freshman students will be able to enhance their capacity to integrate skills, attitudes and behaviors and deal effectively with daily tasks and challenges that are brought about by the transition to college and the demands of academics.

2. RELATED LITERATURE

Literatures point out that the transition to college is marked by complex challenges in emotional, social and academic adjustment which may have been some of the predictors of college student adjustment (Chikering as cited in Gerdes, 1994). Some students find ways to make this transition constructively and adapt to college, whereas others feel overwhelmed and unable to effectively meet the demands of their new roles. In a research output made by Sax, L. et al, it revealed that in United States the percentage of students graduating from college is declining and students purportedly disclosed to have high levels of emotional and psychological stress (1999). The same study suggested that mental health professionals working with college students find ways to better understand the reasons why some students become successful in college with relatively low levels of emotional distress, while others become increasingly emotionally distressed at college. In an attempt to understand predictors of adjustment in college, there were quite a number of researches emphasizing the importance of the development of autonomy and individuation as a main developmental task faced by adolescent college students. Mattanah, J. et. al mentioned in their paper that students with stronger and healthier sense of themselves as individuals are better equipped to handle the demands for independent functioning that go with the college transition (2004). Likewise, findings of a study piloted by Thomas, D. et. al. revealed that self-efficacy beliefs predicted success in academic adjustment and motivation (2009). There were also studies that point out that academic preparedness, scholastic aptitude test scores, and socio-economic status were regarded as the major predictors of college success for students according to Allen (1988). However, this was refuted by McDonald et. al who examined the relationship between these predictors with social comfort (2007). Their study revealed that social comfort and belongingness are significant indicators of college students' success in adapting well to college life.

Another important construct in this concept is the role of self-awareness as necessary in every aspect of life, specifically in the transition to college life. Self-awareness is seen at the core of a person's sense of self (May, 1967 as cited in Goukens, et. al, 2009). According to self-awareness theory of Duval and Wicklund, self-focused attention makes people more conscious of their attitudes and beliefs (cited in Gibbons, F., 1990). In addition, self-awareness is described as the systematic understanding of the educational system with knowledge of the norms, values, and interactions for undergraduates in college (Conley, D., 2007). Consequently, these skills are

considered and necessary for students to cope with and make transition into college. In an article by Feldman, M. et. al., it mentioned that emotion plays the key part in the awareness of one's self (2011). Emotional intelligence forms the basic building blocks of leadership skills (Feldman, M., 2011) It further states that assessing one's strengths and weaknesses gives college students the confidence to tackle any obstacles. In conclusion from the literatures gathered, it is noteworthy that the factors influencing student success in college involve more than just the Grade Point Average. Attention has broadened to include other influences such as beliefs and preferences which allow students to adapt to college life and its demands.

Conceptual Framework

Self-Awareness Skills (SEL Competency) and College Adaptability

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) believes that the use of evidence-based programs promotes positive outcomes and prevents problem behavior in students (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2008). The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework explains that social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2008). The SEL framework has five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective and behavioral

competencies. These are self-awareness (ability to recognise emotions, describe interests and values, and accurately assess strengths), self-management (ability to manage emotions and behaviour, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles), social awareness (ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others and recognize and appreciate similarities and differences), relationship skills and responsible decision-making (ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships based on cooperation).

Fig. 1. Social and Emotional Learning Framework

The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework demonstrates how it enhances students' capacity to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively with daily tasks and challenges (CASEL, 2008). Like many similar frameworks, SEL's integrated framework promotes intrapersonal, interpersonal and cognitive competence. The five core competencies are taught using a variety of approaches: 1) free-standing lessons designed to enhance students' social and emotional competence explicitly; 2) teaching practices such as cooperative learning and project-based learning; 3) integration with academic curriculum areas; and 4) organizational strategies that create a climate and culture conducive to learning. These SEL approaches produce short-term outcomes, which includes more positive attitudes toward oneself, others and, tasks including enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, persistence, empathy, connection and commitment to school, and a sense of purpose (Durlak, J. et. al, 2010). The study further mentioned that more positive social behaviors and relationships with peers and adults, reduced conduct problems and risk-taking behaviors, decreased emotional distress and improved test scores, grades and attendance are some of the several short-term outcomes of SEL. With these short-term benefits of SEL, Jones et al (2015) state that greater social and emotional competence can increase the likelihood of career success, positive family and work relationships and better mental health. In a research conducted by Durlak, et al (2011), it revealed that the subjects who participated in the evidence-based SEL programs showed an eleven percent-point gain in academic achievement compared to students who did not participate in SEL programs. Likewise, these

students who were involved in an SEL program showed improved classroom behaviour, increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others and school. In a report by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, SEL competencies are critically important for the long-term success of all students in today's economy (2015). With these existing evidences of the effectiveness and benefits of SEL, it may be concluded that SEL is a critical part of students' learning to prepare them for the attitudes and skills necessary to adapt to life.

3. METHODOLOGY

This concept paper proposes a framework that serves as a reference guide for counselors in helping college freshman students gain the ability to accurately recognize one's thoughts, emotions and values that influence behavior, thereby adapt to college life better. Using the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework, this concept paper aspires to create a program which employs processes that help students acquire and effectively apply knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to increase one of the core competencies --- self-knowledge.
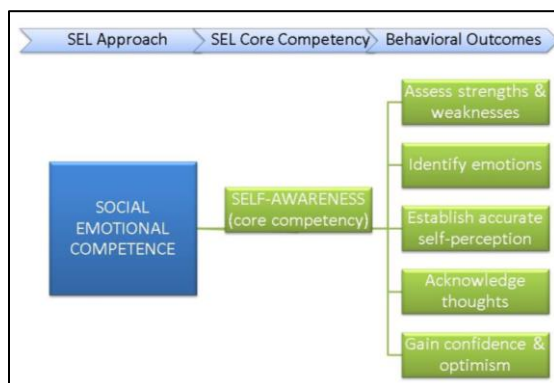

Fig. 2. Conceptual Framework Using Self-Awareness as the Core Competency

Figure 2 shows how self-awareness core competency, which involves understanding one's own emotions, personal goals, and values, is applied to attain observable behavioral outcomes. This includes assessing strengths and weaknesses, identifying emotions, establishing accurate self-perception, acknowledging thoughts and gaining confidence and optimism. High levels of self-awareness require the ability to recognize how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected (Elias, M. 2016). The content of the program is directed towards helping the freshman students develop self-awareness competency, which will enable them to adjust and adapt fully to college life. It will target on developing the behavioral outcomes of the proposed framework.

The initial phase of the program development is targeted on developing modules that will accurately recognize one's thoughts, emotions and values that impacts behavior. The modules to be created are carried out through group psychoeducation sessions facilitated by counselors.

The program will ensure that learning outcomes are achieved and that freshman students will be able to gain better insights and develop self-awareness skills as a core competency necessary in their adaptability to college life.

4. IMPLICATIONS TO COUNSELING

1. The Social and Emotional Learning framework purported in this paper is seen to be an appropriate reference for counseling practitioners to develop programs that effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary in self-awareness.
2. The self-awareness program being conceptualized in this paper will be relevant to the freshman students' learning and will prepare them for the attitudes and skills necessary to adapt to life.
3. The program will highly contribute in the development of the freshman students' ability to integrate skills, attitudes and behaviors which will assist them to deal effectively with daily tasks and challenges brought about by college life.

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