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Transformational Leadership: A Practice Needed for

First-Year Success

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to explore the multidimensional facets of transformational leadership and the impacts of such leadership on first-year academic success programs at the college level. Specifically, transformational leaders within higher-education organizations must share vision, rally support, and genuinely care about student success. The inspiration and motivation instilled in students during the first year of college is of paramount importance for continued academic success. While leading success initiatives, transformational leaders must strive to share the dreams of their students. Educators should explore multiple and creative methods in which to ensure student success.

## Transformational Leadership: A Practice Needed for First-Year Success

Transformational leadership has wide-spread and significant implications for educators and the educational system. Specifically, many institutions of higher education have developed first-year success seminars in an effort to improve retention, graduation rates, and campus connectivity with students. These programs require a transforming leadership effort from all stakeholders of the institution. Moreover, the administration and faculty of higher-education institutions need to understand and practice transformational leadership while engaged in success efforts. This essay will explore the role of transformational leadership and the major considerations and implementation strategies often associated with successful first-year seminar programs.

### Exploring Transformational Leadership

#### *Benefits of Transformational Leadership*

Leadership, unlike many other academic fields of study, is difficult to precisely define or accurately describe. Moreover, the abundant and disjointed sub-categories of leadership offer only limited explanations and incomplete analysis of the art and science of leadership. However, transformational leadership appears to offer the most comprehensive description and generate the most beneficial results. Transformational leadership seems to genuinely seek to benefit followers. Transformational leadership offers followers three critical areas which include: committed service, charisma, and intellectual stimulation.

There is tremendous difficulty and debate in determining exactly when and where to exercise transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is grounded in

meeting higher-order needs within individuals in an attempt to motivate and inspire more success than previously thought possible. In the effort to inspire greater achievement, many transformational leaders exercise great charisma (Bass, 1990). Charisma can, however, fail to produce results. Lunenburg (2003) argued for a de-emphasis on leadership charisma and a stronger advocacy for vision, development, and commitment. Charisma is not necessary for stable organizations; however, charismatic leadership is prevalent in organizations experiencing change.

#### *Positive Results*

Beyond the charismatic component, many transformational leaders stimulate intellectual development within their followers (Bass, 1990; Bass, 1998). Moreover, Leithwood (1992) argues that transformational leadership produces tremendously positive results. Furthermore, there is a clear relationship between transformational leadership and teacher collaboration. Consequently, transformational leadership improves educational stakeholders' attitudes about improvement and reform efforts. Furthermore, Bass (1990) contends that transformational leaders are often the sole difference between success and failure. Likewise, Sergiovanni (2000) maintains that committed service facilitates transformational leadership efforts.

#### Ethical Considerations of Transformational Leadership

#### *Questioned Results*

Transformational leadership, however, is not without critics. In reform efforts, many transformational leaders fall victim to seeking their own desires and interests (Keeley, 1998). Additionally, Gronn (1995) contends that many transformational leaders fail to produce their intended outcomes due to the inability of most leaders to sustain a

motivational pattern. When such selfish desires occur, the transformational effort is reduced to transactional leadership. Transactional efforts reduce the impact of the leadership effort (Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership, however, is not intended to permanently replace transactional leadership (Bass, Aviola, & Goodheim, 1987). Rather, the two styles complement one another and facilitate actions. Consequently, Bass (1998) argued that a delicate mixture of transformational and transactional leadership is necessary to maintain the ethical dimensions of leadership. Nevertheless, the transforming effort seeks to improve morale and foster an atmosphere of continuous improvement. The atmosphere of continuous improvement sparked by transformational leadership provides an outstanding theoretical framework for student success reform efforts on college campuses.

### *Serving Students*

A transformational leadership effort provides first-year college students an altruistic servant who is genuinely seeking to motivate and inspire students to set and meet goals. The inspirational challenges issued by transformational leaders build charisma, trust, and pride (Bass, 1990). Moreover, the practice of transformational leadership provides first-year students with intellectual stimulation. Charisma and intellectual stimulation combine in a powerful manner that facilitates student success. Furthermore, the work of transformational leadership within academic reform efforts builds morale and interdependence at all levels (Leithwood, 1992).

If transformational leadership functions properly, the followers should not need on-going guidance (Bass, 1990). Once a student has gained sufficient inspiration from a transformational leader, the need for constant charismatic supervision from the leader

significantly reduces. Moreover, once the charismatic, intellectual leader has established trust among stakeholders, the ability for self-management and creative ideas greatly increases (Sergiovanni, 2000). In short, transformational leadership inspires others to seek greater achievement and work towards continuous improvement. Transformational leadership empowers others to become free-thinking, independent individuals capable of exercising leadership.

Transformational leadership has no greater forum than within higher education. The rapidly expanding global marketplace mandates that students seek post-secondary education. However, very few students are adequately prepared for the transition from high school to college. Therefore, success-driven reform initiatives are necessary for the success of first-time college students.

#### Characteristics of First-Time Students

The first year of college is the most difficult transition that a student will face (Pascarella, Peterson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In fact, the success rate within the first year of college is the single greatest predictive element for a student's overall success in college. Therefore, the implementation of success initiatives is of paramount importance. The first-generation college student faces unique and difficult challenges beyond the challenges of those who are merely first-time college students. The first-generation college student is perhaps the most vulnerable to making poor grades, dropping out and having low campus communal connectivity (Orbe, 2004). The solution to such problems can be answered through the successful implementation of first-year success seminars.

#### *Colleges' Roles*

Specifically, community colleges can play an enormous role in the development of students. A significant number of students enrolling at community colleges are first-generation students. Due to the tremendous first-generation enrollments, transformational leadership is an attractive approach to increasing campus connectivity and expanding and maximizing the college experience. Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) found clear relationships between transformational leadership and organizational conditions. Additionally, these researchers noted a significant effect between student participation, engagement, and transformational leadership. Transformational leadership helps increase student participation.

There is sufficient evidence that family educational culture is the most significant factor impacting student participation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Orbe, 2004). Simply put, students who have family members who support educational efforts have a greater likelihood of achieving more. It is the duty of an educational institution to ensure that each student receives the proper support system in an effort to maximize the success of all students.

### *Sharing Dreams*

It is also of great importance that all students have the opportunity to experience success. Gill (2006) argues that “good leaders help people make their dreams come true” (p. 12). This dream-reaching experience is especially important for first-year students. The realization of a dream is an experience that all should have the opportunity to pursue. Larson and Murtadha (2002) argue that love is the basis for transformational efforts. Love and genuine concern for students facilitate the transformational process. Moreover, Lyman and Villani (2002) argue for greater empathy and understanding for the

underserved and poor. With a growing number of students from poor and underserved backgrounds enrolling in colleges and universities (Carey, 2004), it is of vital importance that love and empathy dominate the transformational efforts of student reform. Simply put, educational leaders should love and honor the dreams of their students. The pursuit of educational dreams should never cease to motivate and inspire the transformational leader to continue striving to transform individuals.

### History and Benefits of First-Year Success Programs

The first-year success seminar and student success is not an invention of the modern era. Education scholars have discussed and explored how to prepare students for the enormous transition to college from high school for more than a century (Dwyer, 1989; Hunter & Linder, 2005). Hunter and Linder (2005) note that nearly 74% of United States college campuses have a first-year program for new freshmen students. The benefits of freshmen success course work are tremendous. Orbe (2004) argues that first-time college students develop institutional identities based upon their experiences in the first year of college.

### *Shaping Identities*

The connectivity and identity of students can be shaped by first-year experience coursework. Ishler and Upcraft (2005) argue that students enrolled in freshmen-year experience classes show increased campus connections, have higher grade point averages, and have less difficulty in adjustment. Ishler and Upcraft (2005) note: “The first-year seminar is one of the most powerful predictors of first-year student persistence into the sophomore year” (p. 41). Additionally, Hunter and Linder (2005), suggest that successful first-year seminars should be offered for academic credit, involve faculty,



include instructor training and ways of assessing their effectiveness. The first-year seminar is perhaps most important for first-generation college students. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolinak, and Terenzini (2004) note:

First-generation students perhaps benefit more from their academic experiences than other students because these experiences act in a compensatory manner and thus contribute comparatively greater incremental increases in first-generation students' stock of cultural capital (p. 280).

Beyond their tremendous lack of cultural capital, first-generation students have the most difficulty in social, cultural, and academic adjustment (Orbe, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Moreover, first-generation college students are significantly more likely to drop out of college after the first year than their more supported counterparts. The first-generation college population is the most critical. It seems clear that if this group is not reached, their life satisfaction will suffer.

#### *Call to Action*

Colleges and universities can no longer afford to allow students to aimlessly drift through the freshman year without guidance. It is of principal importance that all stakeholders within the higher-education community realize and understand the importance of transformational leadership, and in turn, act on the behalf of students. It is higher education's obligation to ensure that all who seek higher education have the opportunity to achieve their dreams. The moment that educators stop caring about student success and reform efforts is the moment that education ceases to matter. A college education provides the most awe-inspiring change that can happen to an individual.

It seems abundantly clear that transformational leadership is not something accomplished by a single individual. Transforming an organization is a lengthy process that requires a leader to raise the motivation and moral fiber of stakeholders. This is a worthy effort. As institutions of higher-learning take on more and more responsibilities, it is tremendously important that administrators and faculty work to ensure that students find success. There are five critical tips to remember as success efforts proceed.

1. Share inspirational stories about success
2. Know that transforming requires forming
3. Remember that transformation takes time
4. Stay focused
5. Live for the dream

#### Conclusion

The purpose of transformational leadership is threefold. First, the transformational leader sincerely serves the needs of others. This service empowers and inspires followers to achieve great success. Secondly, the transformational leader charismatically leads. This charisma sets a vision. Finally, the intellectual stimulation that a transformational leader offers produces followers of the same caliber as the leader.

Without these three aspects of transformational leadership, student success initiatives would not be as effective. It is, however, the goal of success initiatives to produce worthy students, fully prepared for the challenges of college. Transformational leadership and student success initiatives combine in an awesome force that will undoubtedly change and inspire the lives of students.

Finally, it is my hope that articles such as this will stimulate conversation about the issue of student success. In education's efforts to improve the world, educators must pursue the goal of student success with great passion and drive. Every student that succeeds is yet another testament to the value of education.

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