

Introduction

This report is a team effort by researchers at the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and The Thriving Project at Azusa Pacific University (APU) to gather information at the student and institutional levels to better understand the second college year. The partnership was driven by a desire to increase our knowledge of sophomore student characteristics, institutional efforts to attend to this population, and students' perception about their learning and development. Findings from two parallel research projects are presented: (a) the National Survey of Sophomore-Year Initiatives (NSSYI), administered by the National Resource Center, with a focus on institution-level data, and (b) the Sophomore Experiences Survey (SES), conducted by The Thriving Project at APU, a student-level instrument. The NSSYI was previously administered in 2005 and 2008, and the SES has been continuously administered since 2007; however, in 2014, researchers at the two institutions coordinated the data collection of both instruments to yield a more complete picture of the sophomore year.

Why Continue to Study the Sophomore Year?

Although less is known about the sophomore year compared to other college transition points, such as the first and senior years, the past 20 years have seen increased attention in the literature and in campus programming to better understand and serve second-year students. The sophomore year can be a time of wonder and exploration, presenting opportunities “for turning inward and for exploring how one fits into college life and the world at large” (Schaller, 2010, p. 13). However, students in the second year have also been branded as forgotten, invisible, disillusioned, and dispiriting (Boyer Commission, 1998; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Tobolowsky, 2008). Sophomores have been referred to as the academy's middle children (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006), and, for many students, the experience has long been characterized as a slump (Freedman, 1956), full of student inertia and confusion (Tobolowsky, 2008).

Several factors common in the sophomore year can trigger these paradoxical responses. Sophomores typically begin to wrestle with substantive questions that range from *why am I taking these classes* to *what is the purpose and meaning of my life* (Margolis, 1989; Schaller, 2005). Students shift from uncertainty and random exploration toward a focused approach aimed at attaining more than simple enjoyment from their educational experiences (Schaller, 2005). In addition, deciding on a major and a career path are important choices that second-year students make and may be the most salient issue they face (Coburn & Treeger, 1997; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Gardner, 2000). Yet, students must make the critical decision of settling on a specific educational track while simultaneously engaging in a broad array of general education and introductory courses—and often without the same level of faculty engagement, advisement, or support they experienced in their first year. Moreover, involvement is still being solidified as these students make choices about study abroad, service-learning, civic engagement, and other important engagement opportunities, again, often with limited support (Schreiner, Louis, & Nelson, 2012). Further, for traditional-age students, the second year represents an opportunity for significant personal development. It is a time when students begin to face the struggle between external and internal authority and expectations—reconciling newly learned beliefs with familial or past convictions and developing self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, King, Taylor, & Wakefield, 2012; Coburn & Treeger, 1997).

The sophomore-year experience can be quite different at four-year institutions compared to two-year schools. Second-year students at four-year colleges and universities are more likely to attend full time (U.S. Department of Education, 2013) and have aspirations for a bachelor's degree (Leigh & Gill, 2003). Their second year tends to be focused on developing a sense of self and making choices about majors and, ultimately, career paths. Sophomores at two-year institutions are less likely to attend full-time (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), yet they must still grapple with the same issues of purpose and direction—with more imminent implications. Decisions about next steps, such as transferring or entering the workforce, are at the forefront; however, the time frame is condensed, particularly for those who attend full-time. For the campus professionals who serve these students, the sophomore year at a two-year institution is, in effect, equivalent to the senior year at a four-year college in terms of the transition, career, academic, and support services that need to be provided. Moreover, with greater numbers of part-time and nontraditional students, defining the sophomore year (e.g., by credits earned, the number of semesters or years attending the college, and/or life or work experience) in two-year institutional contexts can be challenging (Jones & Franco, 2010).

Despite ongoing calls to create an integrated undergraduate experience across all years (Boyer Commission, 1998; Keeling, 2004; Kuh, 2010; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), the sophomore year has fewer high-impact programs and curricular offerings compared to other years, particularly in four-year institutions (Barefoot, Griffin, & Koch, 2012). A national survey conducted by Barefoot et al. (2012) found the college experience is front-loaded with summer bridge programs, orientation, first-year seminars, and multiple engagement opportunities, while on the back end (i.e., junior and senior years) lie internships, undergraduate research prospects, and senior capstone experiences. Even peer leadership positions may not be available to students at many four-year institutions until the third year (Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Tobolowsky, 2008). As a result, sophomores receive the least attention of any class, making fewer contacts with faculty and garnering less support from student affairs staff (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

Finally, after first-year students, sophomores are the group at highest risk of attrition (Gardner, Pattengale, Tobolowsky, & Hunter, 2010; Lipka, 2006; Noel-Levitz, 2013). Moreover, Keup, Gahagan, and Goodwin (2010) found evidence that institutions with sophomore success initiatives have higher retention rates than those without them. As the number of institutions providing (or in the process of establishing) second-year programs continues to grow (Keup et al., 2010; Gardner et al., 2010; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007), research is warranted to identify the types of initiatives that are being offered and determine the conditions under which students will flourish.

Theoretical Framework

Underlying the desire to combine our efforts in this research partnership was an assumption that institutional efforts influence student outcomes. This assumption was based on the Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) theoretical framework first introduced by Astin (1991) and which serves as the basis for many student success models (Kennedy & Upcraft, 2010). In any educational situation, students come prepackaged with a variety of personal attributes (e.g., ability, motivation, experience, culture, achievement) representing *inputs*. The *environment* includes the curricular and cocurricular activities offered to students. These programs are developed to produce some kind of change, that is, to have an impact on *student* outcomes. This model provides educators a way to better isolate and evaluate the effectiveness of educational experiences on resulting student learning and development. As such, the I-E-O model served as our framework, with results presented and analyzed from this point of view.

Organization of This Report

Investigating Sophomore Student Success is divided into three sections: (a) an overview of the NSSYI, (b) an overview of the SES, and (c) an integrated discussion of the results from both research efforts and their implications for practice and ongoing research on sophomore student success. In addition, the appendices provide a list of the participating institutions; the survey questions; the frequency distributions of responses to the NSSYI questions, disaggregated by institutional characteristics (i.e., type, control, and size of undergraduate enrollment); and the national norms for the SES. The information and tables in this report will provide useful tools for institutions looking for benchmarks, to create new sophomore-year programs, or to restructure existing initiatives.