

# STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THE SECOND YEAR: ADVANCING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

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Institutions typically invest heavily in the first-year experience to promote persistence, yet colleges are also experiencing a pattern of attrition in the second year. The second year is viewed as a period in which students encounter increasing academic, developmental, and social demands, yet the institution tends to provide less support relative to the first year. Using the interpretative phenomenological approach, this article explores sophomores' perception and understanding of their experience and the intentional approaches institutions can adopt in promoting their success. Semistructured interviews were conducted to analyze students' experiences in the second year. The findings suggest that sophomores are in the process of establishing their identity, re-evaluating their purpose and collegiate experience; consequently the need for a different kind of support is apparent. Second-year students are experiencing an internal transition and are still in need of year-specific support to successfully meet the demands of progressing through college.

## Introduction

Colleges and universities have operated under the premise that the impact of the first-year programs would continue to effectively address the needs of students in subsequent years. However, there is a growing interest in coordinating retention efforts beyond the first year. The United States Department of Education

statistics showed that about two-thirds as many students who dropped out did so in their second year in comparison to their first year (as cited in Lipka, 2006). Tinto (1993) asserted that issues that are important to the first year might not be important to students in subsequent years of their college experience. Colleges are seeing a slight drop in student retention

in the second year and have consequently turned their attention to understanding the second-year experience. The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (2007) reported that at four-year institutions, while 80.4% of freshmen who enrolled in 2004 returned as sophomores in 2005, only 70.9% were still enrolled as juniors in fall 2006.

The research investigates issues and concerns of students in their second year at a large urban institution in the Northeast that offers rich first-year programs but loses students in their sophomore year. The retention rate of first-year students remains comparatively strong; however, there is a drop in the second-year rate of retention. The fall 2010 and 2011 cohort one-year retention showed an increase from 82.2% to 84.2% (Institutional Planning and Research, 2012), which suggests that the students are benefiting from the institution's structured first-year programs. On the other hand, the two-year retention rate dropped from 70.4% to 69.6%. This article explores the students' experience and discusses the implications for practitioners in higher education and opportunities for future research.

## Literature Review

Although much has been written about persistence of students in the first year, major gaps in the persistence literature exist on students beyond the first year. Problems with attrition exist in subsequent years even when students have been successfully engaged in the initial collegiate experience (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). There is, however, very limited empirical evidence on second-year students and the programs designed to help them.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of students in the second year to better understand if they are still in need of college support beyond the first year. Specifically, this study asks: *"How do sophomores from a large urban institution perceive and understand their experience?"* To fully understand if students are having a different kind of experience in their second year relative to the first year, this section will provide an overview of the existing literature on the second-year experience and the implications for the kinds of support they may

need beyond the first year. The second year of college is often referred to as the "forgotten year" and viewed as a period of transition and adjustment for students who find that the safety net and security provided through structured first-year programming are no longer available. Toward this end, sophomores in general may face multiple challenges that are unique to their experience, and if these challenges remain overlooked, they could affect students' social decisions and academic progress. Three strands of literature guide this literature review: sophomore development, persistence, and the second-year specific challenges related to their new academic reality and experience with institutional policies and practices.

## DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

The research emerging on the second-year experience suggests that this is the period in which students need to be astute in their decision making and develop a sense of meaning and purpose about their education, life goals, and their career (Gaff, 2000; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Pattengale, 2006; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Reynolds, Gross, & Millard, 2008; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). During the second year, students are actively seeking to clarify their sense of purpose; consequently, they become self-evaluative and self-critical and are pushed by the need to declare a major and develop career goals. Additionally, they are also seeking insights into redefining relationships.

Developing purpose, establishing identity and defining lives direction becomes more important to students in their second year. This according to Richmond and Lemons (1985) is a major developmental task for sophomores and is important for students to successfully navigate the second year. Sophomores could deal with identity crises created by periods of confusion and uncertainty (Furr & Gannaway, 1982), struggle with their identity development (Coburn & Treeger, 2003), and encounter personal relationship problems (Richmond & Lemons, 1985). These developmental challenges are distinct from what they experience in the first year because the focus in the second year tends to move beyond managing the transition to college to focusing on clarification of purpose and reasons for being in college.

## ACADEMIC CONCERNS

Scholars purport that challenges related to academic performance is one of the concerns in the sophomore year (Adelman, 2006; Bean, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pattengale, 2000). Schreiner (2007b) described this experience as sophomores entering into the “academic twilight zone.” She contended that sophomores’ curriculum workload intensifies in its rigor because they are dealing with the demands of major courses and the general education courses they avoided in their first year. Additionally, the grades and GPA received in the first year could further affect their academic performance and their decisions in selecting a major in the second year.

Coupled with the intense academic workload is dealing with the reality of selecting and deciding on a major. According to Richmond and Lemons (1985), selection of a major is considered a significant personal decision and developmental task faced by second-year students and can become a stressful period for those who are pressured to pick the most appropriate major. In choosing a major, students should demonstrate academic competence for specific coursework, have an awareness of available options, and demonstrate strong decision-making skills, particularly in balancing interest with future career or life goals. Indecision about choosing a major may therefore be perceived as sophomores weathering the developmental crisis of meaning and purpose (Schreiner, 2007b). Students could remain undecided at the end of the second year, and according to Hunter et al. (2010), they are more likely to withdraw from school or select any major that would allow for career decision making later.

Sophomores may also face the challenge of not being accepted into their first choice major, or question whether their initial choice is appropriate. Schreiner (2007b) contended that it is often in the sophomore year that a student begins to realize that his or her plans for a certain major may not materialize and may awaken to the need to have a “Plan B.” Whereas the main challenge for first-year students is to connect to the institution, the challenge for sophomore students involves committing to a major or discipline that will support their professional trajectory (Hunter et al., 2010).

## PERSISTENCE IN THE SECOND YEAR

It is established in the literature that there are challenges specific to the second year and if not addressed could affect persistence. Historically, institutions have dedicated extensive resources to the incoming class in an effort to integrate and retain students, junior and senior students are guided into career advisement, planning, and future goals, but sophomores are left to navigate the environment on their own. Gardner (2000) outlined that retention efforts during the first year may be useless unless maintained during the second year.

Four distinct areas in which sophomores could face unique challenges include dealing with new academic demands, resolving developmental concerns, navigating institutional demands, and meeting expectations (Pattengale, 2000). Sophomores who are unable to meet these demands could become disillusioned by their new reality and experience the sophomore slump. The sophomore slump is identified as the leading cause of attrition in the second year. Freedman (1956) was the first to discover that sophomores could fall into the slump. Findings from his research at Vassar College suggested that second-year students were the least satisfied with their collegiate experience. He further stated that students who were ambivalent about their reasons for attending college or indecisive about their major could experience apathy and stress in their second year.

In addressing the issue of persistence in the second year, it is imperative to not confuse the factors with first-year issues. According to research conducted by Schreiner (2007a) about 20% to 25% of second-year students experience the slump. The results from her annual spring surveys showed that at 100 colleges, students who reported dissatisfaction or disillusionment experienced shock at losing the intense institutional attention and support they received as freshman. This support becomes necessary as they try to make critical decisions about the direction of their lives. Schreiner (2007a) defined slumping as a motivational, emotional experience. Sophomores could lose the connection they had during the first year. They are no longer in the honeymoon phase but are awakened to the reality of their environment and collegiate experience. Coburn and Treeger (2003, p. 47) described the sophomore year as

“the transition between wide-eyed awe and upper-class confidence.” Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin (2007), in their research, concluded that sophomores felt invisible and lost.

The consequences of the academic challenges coupled with a reduction in support services often lead to disconnect and possibly to attrition from college (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008). Ennis-Mcmillan, Ammirati, Rossi-Reder, Tetley, and Thacker (2011) concluded from their research that second-year challenges require second-year support. Their qualitative research explored sophomores’ experiences after being engaged in established first-year programs. The first-year programs, according to Ennis-Mcmillan et al. (2011), were successful in enhancing student engagement and achievement; but for many the impact did not carry through to the second year. The findings from their research suggested that the second year poses different challenges and require a different kind of support.

#### INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

The ability of institutions to meet the needs of any class of students is critical to their continued success. There are, however, growing concerns about the sophomore experience because substantial evidence in the literature outlines that institutional support lessens in the second year. According to Juillerat (2000), sophomores tend to place a high value on an environment that promotes intellectual growth; valuable course content and excellent classroom instruction; knowledgeable, fair, and caring faculty; an approachable and knowledgeable advisor; tuition that is a worthwhile investment; adequate financial aid; a smooth registration process with a good variety of course offerings; and an enjoyable school experience. Sophomores are therefore becoming more critical of their environment and the availability of support and resources they need to keep them engaged beyond the first year.

Boivin, Fountain, and Baylis (2000) studied 60 students who left a small liberal arts college in Michigan during and after their sophomore year over a two-year period. The students identified issues specifically related to the institution and the inability of the institution to meet their needs as reasons for leaving. Additionally, lack of opportunities for leadership and lack of faculty

involvement were issues that were significant in the second year. Further, the students who successfully handled their personal transition issues in the first year were aware of what higher education ought to afford them (Boivin et al., 2000). Increasing awareness and expectations, according to Boivin et al. (2000), forced students to assess the adequacy of the institution in meeting their needs.

In summary, adjustment issues, academic demands, student engagement, faculty involvement, students’ overall satisfaction with the institution, and financial management experience are factors that have been identified as related to attrition in the second year. Students who exhibit low confidence in their transition experience to the second year, those who feel their needs are not being met, and those who struggle with academic demands are less likely to persist.

#### Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Schaller’s student development theory, which was used as the lens to explore the development of traditional-aged sophomores. Schaller (2005) concluded that the second year is a critical period for identity development. According to Schaller (2005), students should move through four stages of development in different aspects of their lives as they try to define themselves, their relationships, and their purpose. Sophomores who progressed through these stages will have a successful collegiate experience. Random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choice, and commitment are the stages of development through which students are most likely to advance during the second year.

The stage of random exploration is observed during the first year and is characterized by an interesting combination of exuberance and lack of reflection. However, some sophomores could linger in this stage. Students in this stage are less concerned with making decisions about their future and are more concerned with becoming associated with their new environment. Schaller identified the other stage as focused exploration. During this stage, students become self-evaluative, self-critical, and responsible, but this may not be so for all sophomores. The stage of focused exploration is considered a critical stage for sophomores because

true reflection and development start at this point and sophomores are beginning to have a deeper insight into the direction of their lives. The length of time spent in this phase could impact their choices and decision. The next stage is tentative choice and student should ideally be at this phase at the end of their second year. Schaller (2005) stated that students should have a clear defined picture of the future and feel a sense of responsibility for themselves and their learning. They begin the process of testing the choices reflected on during focused exploration. The final stage is commitment and according to Schaller (2005), this is the ideal stage where sophomores complete the transition but very few make it to this point at the end of their second year. There is increased engagement in the direction of their lives and students develop more confidence in their decisions and choices.

Schaller's sophomore development theory (2005) was ideal to create a framework for understanding the collegiate experience and needs of second-year students in this study. The theory establishes a frame of reference about the interpersonal and intrapersonal changes that occur while sophomores are in college. What are the challenges encountered in the second year? Are sophomores still in need of additional support even after exposure to intentionally structured freshman year experience courses, programs, and support services?

## Research Methodology

The premise of this research was to investigate and identify the experiences articulated by sophomores in a large urban public institution in the Northeast. The researcher gathered information from the voices of students to understand their perception of the second-year experience. The primary research question that guided this inquiry was the following: *How do students at a large urban institution perceive and describe their experience in the second year?* Students who were currently enrolled in the institution were participants in this study.

The methodology chosen for this research study is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to study the lived experiences of sophomore students. The goals of the research included the following: generating and collecting

primary qualitative research data on the experiences of second-year students; applying the interpretative phenomenological analysis to the data; identifying the key themes of students' experiences in the second year; describing the experiences of sophomore students; and presenting the discussion based on the findings in the study, the theoretical framework, and existing research. The research focused on the students' understanding of their experiences and sense-making activities, which is the very essence of IPA.

Purposeful sampling was used for this study, and the inclusion criteria were as follows: students registered in the second half of the second year, students who participated in a first-year program, and representing different majors. Twelve traditional-aged sophomores participated in semistructured, open-ended interviews.

## Data Collection: Participants

Consonant with IPA is the intense qualitative analysis detailing the accounts of experiences derived from participants. Smith and Osborn (2008) identified semistructured interviews as the exemplary method for IPA. Semistructured interviews allowed for an open exchange and dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Merriam (1998) asserted that semistructured interviews and unstructured interviews are widely used in qualitative research. The open-ended nature of the questions provided opportunities for both the interviewer and interviewees to discuss the students' experiences and feelings about their sophomore year.

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, the researcher, with the assistance of the first-year program director, recruited students to participate in the open-ended interview process. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. The Rev.Com transcription service was used to transcribe the interviews, and the researcher analyzed the data with the aid of the MAXQDA software. The transcript was sent to each participant for review and feedback, and five participants responded.

Table 1 shows the distribution of participants, which is consistent with the student population at the institution. The students who participated in this study are traditional-aged students representing different majors.

**Table 1 Participants' Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Major	First-Year Program
Brian	20	Male	American Indian	Speech pathology	Yes
Carlene	20	Female	African American	Business	Yes
Christella	20	Female	White	Environmental science	Yes
Grace Ann	19	Female	White	Creative Writing	Yes
Jacob	20	Male	White	Actuarial mathematics	Yes
James	20	Male	Asian	Computer science	Yes
Jane	20	Female	White	Sociology	Yes
Karen	20	Female	Hispanic	Psychology	Yes
Larissa	20	Female	White	Psychology	Yes
Michelle	20	Female	White	Business	Yes
Pamela	20	Female	White	Early childhood ed	Yes
Stephen	20	Male	African American	Accounting	Yes

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process was iterative and inductive and the guidelines outlined by Smith et al. (2009), were adapted by the researcher to analyze the data. The MAXQDA computer program was used to conduct line-by-line coding of transcript and aided the analysis for this research. The initial stage of analysis involved immersing in the data through close reading of the transcript and note taking. The next step was working with the notes to transform notes into emerging themes. These themes were derived from the participants' accounts of their sophomore experience. Seeking connections between emerging themes, categorizing themes according to the similar concepts, and providing a descriptive label was the next stage of the analysis. The data were studied to allow for the emergence of constructs, Creswell (2007) outlined the importance of using categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns. A final list of major themes were identified and applied to describe and explain the personal accounts of the participants' experience. The goal was to learn from participants the factors that contributed to a successful second-year experience and the challenges if any that they encountered.

## Major Findings and Emergent Themes

Seven major themes describing the second-year experience were identified. The themes defined the study

participants' understanding of gaining purpose, establishing relationships, dealing with personal and institutional challenges as well as their own experiences, and understanding of the sophomore slump. Additionally, through their own understanding of their second-year experience, participants shared the needs of students and the institution's role in meeting their needs. This section defines the themes and provides examples of students' quotes from the interviews that were reflected in the themes. Later on in the discussion, the themes are examined in the context of the theoretical framework and the existing literature.

### DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

The first theme highlighted participants' experience with development in their own intellectual growth, how they defined themselves, and their direction. The second year was described as a period of transformation both personally and academically. This transformation had participants becoming more reflective on finding meaning and purpose.

Jane stated:

Sophomore year you are developing and you are processing things around you differently; it's a learning experience, a kind of growing-up type of development. I learned a lot about myself and who I want to be and who I think I want to become and learn to be more confident in my academic work. I kind of matured.

As sophomores in this study matured toward adulthood, there was an increased awareness of self, purpose, and direction of their lives. Moral and psychosocial development occurred as they moved into adulthood. The 12 participants characterized themselves as growing and changing mentally, emotionally, and academically and becoming more engaged in active and reflective thinking. Brian concurred that his outlook became different: "This is when I started thinking more long term. I made a list of goals in my life that I'd like to accomplish by a certain time."

### INCREASED SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Assuming greater responsibility for their learning and choices was a common thread among the participants. There was the stronger inclination toward taking their academic responsibility more seriously and dealing with the reality of being in college, which was different from how they felt in the first year. Michelle summarized it this way: "I think when you are a freshman you are like, oh, I am a college student, like, look at me. However, I when I got into sophomore year, I took it seriously. I just need to get things done."

The sense of responsibility extended to an understanding of what they needed to do in order to ensure their success. Realizing that study patterns changed, proper time management was required as well as the importance of resolving issues that could carry over from the first year. These unresolved issues could create more difficulty in the second year, especially when the academic demands and expectations increased. Stephen outlined the following: "I learned in the second year that I need to overcome my anxiety by three things: just hanging out with the right crowd, managing your study time, with your having fun, too."

### DECISION MAKING

Developing strong decision-making skills was important for sophomores as they transition toward making greater academic commitment and thinking about their vocation. The decision-making process could sometimes become complex because sophomores are required to examine their own values and interests and sometimes balance these factor with parental expectations.

Grace-Ann shared her experience of having to balance her parents' expectations with her own choices. She struggled with the thought of disappointing her parents, who expected her to follow their vocational path of becoming a doctor. Her volunteer experience in the emergency room helped her to finalize the decision about her major. She outlined: "I realized, I looked around and said, this is not for me, not where I want to be." Similarly Stephen had to inform his parents about a change in major from computer science to accounting. He stated: "I wouldn't dare tell them in first year. In sophomore year I told them, you know what, I have to switch the major. It is not like a big thing; everyone in college does it."

Participants in this study expressed the importance of being judicious about choosing their major and doing so in a time-conscious manner. Stephen asserted: "Making a decision in the sophomore year about your major and career choice is significant and will set the groundwork for whether you will graduate early or not."

The challenge of choosing a major and declaring a major can often yield surprises for sophomores if they realize that they are struggling with required courses. Through the experiences of some participants, they learned the valuable lesson of finding an alternative major if the major chosen is posing academic challenges. Declaring a major can become a source of stress for sophomores if they are faced with academic challenges. Participants valued academic efficacy in courses related to their major. Jane had to seriously think about her initial choice: "I was not handling my pre-med courses well, so I turned to Plan B, which was psychology or sociology. After much advisement and how connected I felt to the courses, I chose sociology."

Deciding on a major was a huge developmental task for these participants, who wanted to choose a major they were passionate about or could excel in.

### BUILDING AND MAINTAINING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Establishing meaningful relationships was another significant theme that emerged from the data set. Some participants saw faculty members as quite resourceful and felt more comfortable approaching a faculty

member. Some consulted with professors as they tried to make decisions about their academic and career goals. The consultation with faculty members extended to seeking advice for personal issues and needing recommendations. They viewed faculty members not only in their roles as educators but as information brokers, mentors, and individuals who understood students' struggles. Pamela's view of faculty was as follows:

In the second year you feel more comfortable going to faculty to ask for explanation, and to challenge a grade and insist on an explanation on why I got this grade. My connection felt deeper with faculty because my major was small.

Developing peer connection was a significant finding. Friendship with peers was at a deeper level to foster more meaningful relationships. Participants sought friends who shared the same values and who could make successful contribution to their academic journey. The importance of peer-to-peer connections was integral to sophomores in this study. They spoke of relying on peers and upper-class students for academic advice and guidance. Jane felt it was important to redefine her friendships:

The sophomore year was a year of transformation—a year where friends were different and friendships become more meaningful. I was very aware that I needed friends who were like me. I have this course and I need to study; let's go do it.

Karen also shared the same sentiment: "Second year you start choosing different friends; high school friends go away after the first year because of the major changes, and we establish new friendships."

## INSTITUTIONAL CONCERNS

The participants in this study highlighted some of the institutional challenges and the misconceived notions about sophomores and their preparedness to successfully navigate the college processes. Sophomores were beginning to feel comfortable with college, but ironically they were not fully prepared for the new demands of the second year. They were still in need of support such as more advisement on choosing a major, career, deciding on study abroad, and finding internships. For these sophomores it was about being prepared to

declare a major and doing so in a timely manner, having adequate advisers with availability, and being accurately informed about requirements for their majors.

Sophomores in this study were very critical of the quality of advisement at the institution. They were not particularly ready for the transition to departmental advisements. Some expressed concerns about the limited information on major requirements, insufficient advisers in academic departments to assist students, and limited course offerings. James was frustrated with trying to find courses. He stated: "I had to track professors down to get over tally for my major courses, and this was stressful." Brian had to do his research on his major and expressed his frustration with the lack of information about the speech pathology major:

When we are sophomores, this is the time where we want to look into that stuff. I felt that if I had someone to talk to personally, that would have been very helpful. I would not have to go what I went through. An adviser in the speech pathology department would have been good.

Some felt the institution needed to place more emphasis on students declaring their majors. Participants felt they were not prepared to meet the institution's deadline to declare their major and needed more time to think about their choices. Carlene expressed that the message of declaring a major needs to be emphasized:

I think it was told to us, but you don't really think about it until last minute. Maybe from the beginning of the sophomore year to the end of the sophomore year, even professors should remind you.

The process and the timing of declaring a major also posed challenges for sophomores in this study. Some academic departments had a straightforward online process, while other areas had a more complex and convoluted process. Sophomores tend to sense the urgency in declaring their majors as the deadline approaches. Carlene further stated the importance of engaging sophomores ahead of time to keep them informed of the expectations:

I think having open sessions where people could talk and be, like, I really don't know, would be helpful for sophomores, especially just because that is your

transition to where it is like, OK, I know what college is about now; I know what they expect of me; now I need to know what I want to study.

Financing their education was stressful for two participants. Even the financial aid process was still daunting for sophomores. Jane, for example, expressed her frustration with some of the college processes:

There are always things that are also out of my control at some point, like financial aid. The financial aid process is frustrating because of the way they communicate to students. You have to figure out where the bursar is, how to complete financial aid.

Some participants had to make the decision to work part-time and study to help their parents fund their education. These challenges created periods of stress for some participants. In addition to the new academic demands, trying to navigate college processes on their own, was the need to balance the personal challenges of deciding to work or stay in school.

### SOPHOMORE COMMUNITY

Building a community to establish identity and support is critical to a successful sophomore experience. The lack of social engagement in the sophomore year was quite evident and was identified as a major difference from the first-year experience. Participants recognized the change in the institutional attention and support in the second year relative to their first-year experience. There was a clear understanding that they felt less engaged, ignored, and abandoned by the institution. Carlene summed it up as such:

First year you are welcomed with open arms; they made you feel like you made the best choice ever coming here. Then you get kicked to the side a little in your sophomore year. In the second year, they don't really tell you anything.

Similarly, Christella also shared these sentiments:

In the second year, you kind of realize that you are on your own. In the first year, you have the Freshman Year Learning Community, but in the second year, you have to figure out where the bursar is, complete financial aid, figure out the registration process, figure out what the registrar is, and get used to figuring out things on your own.

There was the expressed need to bond with other sophomores who were having similar experiences. Establishing this network through events would allow them to meet other students and would help to increase their sense of belonging. They recognized the strong efforts to welcome them as first-year students and believed they needed a different kind of support to meet the needs of the second year. They repeatedly mentioned the need for more encouragement. For these participants, fostering a community of peers would support learning and increase their overall satisfaction with their sophomore experience.

One of the most vital elements of participating in the first-year program for the study participants was the engagement in communities and social programming, which helped with the integration process into college. When they transitioned to the second year, this type of social engagement was nonexistent. As evidenced by participants' responses, they agreed on the need for more sophomore-specific events to allow sophomores to bond and stay informed about the goals and expectations of the second year.

Jacqueline articulated her overall view of how sophomores were treated in relation to freshmen and upperclassmen:

In the first year, as an incoming freshman you get a lot of support. In the junior and the senior year, you are pretty much on track because this is your major. As sophomores, you are still looking for guidance on deciding on a major, career internship, or studying abroad, which is not necessarily there.

Carlene supported this view and highlighted that it is important to pay attention to sophomores because this is the point where students start thinking about transferring. "If someone wants to transfer, they would most likely think about it in the sophomore year."

### SOPHOMORE SLUMP

The sophomore slump is linked to the second-year experience and is identified as one of the reasons for attrition. When asked about their understanding of the sophomore slump, most participants shared their perceptions and experiences with slumping. Participants viewed the sophomore slump as a "wake-up period." Carlene described it as "a period similar to senioritis

in grade school where the bare minimum is done.” She recalled:

There were times when I was just too tired. I knew the work had to be done because bad things would happen if it weren't. Dropping out was not an option. Why would that be an option? You're, like, halfway there.

James detailed his experience with the slump and stated the following: “I think at some point I experienced this because during the second year no one is there to guide you. It is bad if it has to happen during your sophomore year and you can't get over it.”

Brian also shared his experience with slumping because of the challenges he had with defining his purpose being at that particular college:

I have the thoughts whether I need to be here. In the first semester of the second year, I was at a low point and I had to seek counseling. I needed someone to talk to, so I went to the personal counseling. I tried to talk to my mom about it but I never got anywhere. It was good to talk to someone about this. I was at a low point in the first semester of my second year and felt the need to talk to someone. It decreased a lot since the second half of the year and I was able to focus more.

Some participants in this study struggled with the sophomore slump for various reasons: not feeling that they belong, dealing with the new challenges and trying to navigate the environment on their own, trying to make decisions that could impact their future, trying to deal with the new expectations and transition from being in a community to feeling isolated. Some admitted to being less diligent and losing the motivation to complete their coursework. For some, experiencing the slump was a period of awakening to their new academic reality and losing the special status they experienced in the first year.

## Summary of the Research Results

The narratives that emerged from the participants' description of their second years substantiate findings from the existing literature. The participants viewed themselves as transitioning to another phase of their development and academic experience and evolving

from being newly minted college students to becoming more confident and seasoned in the environment. Their second-year experience was also framed as one with competing challenges and the need for year-specific support to meet these challenges.

For these sophomores, their developmental process was marked by an increase in confidence in choosing their direction and understanding their purpose. The study participants described themselves as developing into adulthood and making the best possible adjustments to meet the demands of the second year. The adjustments required them to reassess their lives and their academic journey to fulfill new standards of competence intellectually and interpersonally. Toward this end, they became mindful of establishing more meaningful relationships, developing purpose, and increasing their level of academic commitments.

There is evidence to suggest that these participants were either less reliant or were becoming less reliant on parental guidance and support and were more inclined to seek support from peers and faculty members. They relied on perspectives of their peers and faculty as they made decisions about their academic paths. Faculty members were regarded as partners in the learning process.

Although they had become more focused, purpose driven, and intellectually and psychologically grounded, they also experienced a gap or void in their second-year experience. Some sophomores further defined their experience as a period of being in college to do what needed to be done; these sophomores felt that the honeymoon phase of the college experience had worn off.

The findings revealed that sophomores were dissatisfied with aspects of their college experience. They expressed their dissatisfaction with institutional services such as academic and career advisement, lack of guidance and opportunities for social engagement, and major and career exploration. Participants also expressed the importance of having a stronger sense of community among students in the second year.

In conclusion, the participants' stories revealed that the second-year experience is multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. It is characterized by transformation of self and increased confidence, direction, purpose, reality check, relationships, academic expectations, and overall campus expectations. It also includes

challenges, frustration, confusion, strong decision making on career and major, less direction and guidance from the institution on what needs to be done, and awareness about having less time to make up for a mistake or failed course or changed decision. James summed up the second year as the end of transformation between college and high school to coming one step closer to the real life.

## Discussion

This section discusses the implications of the findings. The findings substantiate the literature on the unique needs of the second year and validate the importance of developing year-specific services to help students navigate the challenging areas and promote retention and student success. It is established in the literature and is evident in these findings that students could struggle with establishing their identity and reevaluating their purpose and collegiate experience. A consistent theme in the literature is the challenges associated with the decision of selecting a major. Selection of a major requires students to have the academic ability for specific coursework, awareness of available options, and strong decision-making skills to balance interests with future career and life goals. The findings from this study also showed that sophomores might need to balance parents' expectations along with the other factors that go into selecting their majors. This might be a unique finding in this study, but it is worth mentioning, as this adds to the mounting pressures of the second-year experience.

The scholarship on the second-year experience tends to frame the experience as one plagued with challenges. Overall, the findings from this research clearly substantiate the literature on the challenges students could face in the second year. However, there is evidence from this study to suggest that the transition to the second year can also be viewed as a year of opportunity with competing responsibilities. This finding is punctuated by the participant's desire to weather the storm of the second year. It is clear that without the year-specific support, sophomores will struggle to fulfill their responsibilities and become disenchanting with college life. Consequently, these opportunities could become challenges. Reframing the second-year experience as

one of opportunities further reinforces the need for the right kind of support for students to successfully fulfill their responsibilities.

## Statement of Limitations

Every study has limitations. Therefore, the researcher had to provide sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible. The following limitations were included in the design of the student. The study was limited to an urban public institution and was conducted in one of 17 campuses within that large university system. The participants were limited to only traditional-aged students, and they were all students who participated in a first-year program; therefore, the perspectives of students who were not in a first-year program were not included. The sample size was also limited to students who had completed the second semester of the second year; therefore, there might have been additional challenges that they could have forgotten due to maturation. The sampling was purposeful, and the study participants were self-selected.

## Recommendations for Professional Practice

The following recommendations are proposed for professionals in higher education seeking to understand the needs and concerns of sophomores to ultimately provide the kinds of support that would successfully meet the demands as students progress through college. The research findings support the need for mentorship and guidance for sophomores. Establishing second-year programs and initiatives to reintegrate students into college and define the new realities will help sophomores with their development and transition. Sophomore-specific programs will help to promote opportunities for both academic and social engagement.

Second-year programs should have a mentoring component and should be inclusive and comprehensive. Peer-to-peer interaction was highly valued among participants in this research; therefore, providing mentoring services specific to the second year would be beneficial to sophomores who feel the guidance is limited. Mentoring would provide the opportunity for sophomores to be paired with faculty and staff or

upper-class students who could provide additional academic and cocurricular support as they try to make decisions about their goals and their future.

Creating a sophomore-specific orientation would provide the opportunity to present and discuss the second-year expectations. The orientation should include workshops to introduce students to different academic majors and expose them to study abroad and leadership opportunities. This level of engagement and support would help to bolster the second-year experience as students try to adjust to the new academic and social demands.

Focusing on academic and career planning is the hallmark of the second-year experience and is crucial to student success. Promoting initiatives and events that support major and career exploration would benefit students in the second year and cultivate collaboration between faculty and staff in sponsoring major fairs and career and major events. Partnerships among departments such as the career center, academic departments, student affairs, and personal counseling are essential to create a holistic experience for students. It has been established that sophomores need guidance and direction in exploring and declaring their majors and aligning their choices with their career or educational goals; therefore, advisement should be tailored to engage students into reflecting deeply about their academic plans.

Mastery of academic content and competence in major course was essential for sophomores in this study. Sophomores who are more engaged in their learning will remain committed to their major and will persist. Promoting undergraduate research in the second year provides the opportunity for students to become more engaged learners. This will increase the opportunity for more contact with faculty both inside and outside the classroom. The role of faculty in promoting retention is well documented in the literature.

Keeping sophomores informed is also necessary as they deal with their new realities. Creating a sophomore experience website directed to sophomore students will increase the campus awareness of this class of students. The website could serve as a repository for sophomore-specific information, events, and narratives. This will also help to develop a sense of community

for sophomores as they try to find a home in academic departments.

Prior to implementing sophomore initiatives, it is important to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to provide the appropriate support for students and increase the institution's awareness of students' needs as they move through developmental changes and respond to expectations. Needs assessment could be conducted through additional focus groups and surveys. Assessment of these initiatives is also essential to ensure that programs are successfully meeting the needs of the students.

## Future Research

Since the research was conducted on traditional-aged students, there is room for more research on how different groups of students would advance through the stages of development. The results from the study are not generalizable, and more research is needed to understand the impact of financial aid on sophomore persistence. Additionally, the study participants did not include transfer students who could also be considered sophomores. Finally, this study was done at a four-year institution; therefore, a study of sophomore students within a two-year school could add to the scholarship on sophomores' experiences.

## Conclusion

Sophomores are similar to a sibling stuck between the older child and the baby seeking attention. The findings suggest that it is necessary to continue the provision of specific support to maximize all students' learning and development. Therefore, sophomores should not be viewed as the "forgotten class." It is necessary to understand that sophomores are going through a period of transition. This is more of an internal transition and dealing with new demands within the academic environment. While they are trying to process the transformation, the second-year specific support tends to be limited because institutions have operated under the assumption that sophomores are no longer new to the environment. However, we have learned that sophomores do require a different kind of approach—not handholding but guidance in helping them to define

their direction and purpose. This study supports the literature on the second college year and the experiences of sophomore students. Student in their second year of college encounter developmental, academic, and institutional challenges that, if not addressed, will lead to the sophomore slump, which is identified as one of the most significant reasons for attrition in this group. This study also adds to the literature that second year can be viewed as a year of opportunity with competing responsibilities. If institutions fail to provide year-specific support to assist students with fulfilling these responsibilities, the opportunities can become challenges.

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