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Schlossberg’s Transition Theory: A Period of Change
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Transition theory was originally developed to use as an assessment for employment and career trainings as opposed to the field of higher education. Much of Schlossberg’s research emphasizes the transition of new employees to a company or from a work to retirement role. Her goal within the research was to understand the transition process and how to ensure a strong transition to the company based on loyalty and retention. The majority of these concepts are also applicable to the field of higher education. As an educational institution and a business, it is important for staff and also students to have a successful transition to the college or university.

Nancy Schlossberg’s transition theory was originally focused on workforce transitions. Her work was dedicated to employees who were transitioning into a new role or beginning retirement. Her own personal experience with change created the foundation in her pursuit of understanding transitions. She voluntarily relocated across the country for a job opportunity and she had trouble with making the necessary transition. From this experience Schlossberg decided to investigate geographic moves which led to inconclusive results. This prompted her to dedicate her life to understanding transitions and the effects they have on individuals. A primary goal of the theory is to connect coping strategies that promotes an understanding of what is happening. Many of her ideas were an extension of prior research from Levinson, Neugarten, Lowenthal, and Chiriboga. Their focus on positive adult development and the stages of life influenced her as she continued to revise her theory. Its origin emphasized understanding adults in transition, but it is important to understand that college students are adults as they begin the transition to an institution of higher education. Throughout their four
years of a large number of students will continue to encounter transitions to which this theory may be applied.

To understand Schlossberg’s transition model and theory, it is pertinent to first understand the concept of a transition. A transition is defined as anything that changes relationships, routines, assumptions and roles (Evans, 2010, p. 215). There are numerous changes that occur in a person’s life without significance and therefore are not considered a transition. Transitions fall into three types of classifications: those that are anticipated, those which are unanticipated, and the nonevent. Regardless of its categorization the transition is given importance to the individual and their perception of the event or nonevent which has occurred. Events which fall under anticipated are those that are expected to occur such as a high school graduation or beginning college. A sudden loss of a family member could be considered an unanticipated transition as it occurred unexpectedly without prior knowledge or preparation. The nonevents can sometimes be the most devastating as it is an event that is expected to happen but does not for any number of reasons. These nonevents can be further divided into subcategories which can lead to a better understanding of the impact a nonevent could have on an individual. The personal nonevents are relevant to individual aspirations that do not occur. In contrast ripple nonevents are felt by the individual because of a nonevent that occurred to someone else. Resultant nonevents were caused by an event which took place and delayed nonevents have the anticipation that they still could happen even though it may be highly unlikely. While in life all three transitions occur to every person, their impact varies for each individual. In most cases the impact of a transition is more important than the transition itself. This concept attempts to explain how a transition may affect an individual’s life and their
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perception of the event. Transition theory includes what determines a transition, the different forms of transition, the transition process, and the factors which influence a transition. While considering the importance of the type and impact of transition, so too is the context. The context describes the relationship of an individual to a transition and its setting. The goal of the theory is to connect what a person needs to cope with during life and facilitate an understanding of what is happening at the point of transition.

Most transitions do not occur suddenly even if the event itself is sudden. The reaction to the situation may take time to be recognized and processed as a student leaves known roles, routines, and relationships for the unknown. The reaction time for each student will vary as well as how each student will cope with the transition also differs. For example, two students experiencing homesickness may cope in two very different ways. Transition is an individualized process and can lead to growth or decline depending on a student’s reaction to transition. It is important to move the conversation from preoccupation with the event or nonevent to integration of its aftermath. Any type of transition produces stress for the student, and therefore proper coping mechanisms must be created. By taking stock of the transition coping strategies and self-reflection can be utilized throughout the process.

The basic tenets of the theory are comprised of three components: approaching change, taking stock, and taking charge. Approaching change allows for a student to understand the transition which will or has begun to occur. Within the second stage the theory begins to intensify. At this stage the first three of the four S’s are introduced: situation, self, and support. Each of these components allows for an understanding of where the student is at the moment of transition. Situation allows the student to understand the time of transition. This period
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isn’t isolated to the timing of the event but also encompasses factors such as control, duration, and assessment. These additional factors expand the understanding of the situation that has occurred and the effect of the transition. The stage which focuses on the self emphasizes the inner strength of an individual. Personal and demographic characteristics in addition to the psychological resources assist in coping and understanding the personal views on life the student may hold. The parameters of transition theory support the analysis of a student’s wellbeing in understanding social support. The social relationship is defined as intimate or romantic relationships, the family unit, friends, and the community or institution. There are several ways to measure social support through identification of stable supports, role dependent supports, and supports that are likely to change. In regards to the function of support, it provides an analysis of their well-being. The final S is strategies which begins the process of taking charge of the transition. These strategies are an attempt to change, reframe, or reduce the stress of a situation. In order to process the coping strategies effectively the student should seek information, lead to direct action, an inhibition of action, or intrapsychic behavior. Within the final stage are the phases of transition which are described as moving in, moving through, and moving out.

Transitions lead to growth and development; however a transition can be classified in as either positive or negative. In terms of transition, one must also analyze the adaptation to a specified transition. Adaptation to a transition occurs with an individual’s perception of transition, characteristics of pre and post transition environments, and characteristics of the individual (Evans, 2010, p. 213). Oftentimes these perceptions can be assets, liabilities, a mixture of the two, or neutral in terms of influence on the transition. Adaptation does not
always occur and as a result transition theory can be linked to Egan’s helping model which solves problems and develops opportunities.

Egan’s model is not a theory but rather a resource for students to ask the questions: What is going on? What do I want instead? and How might I get to what I want within the parameters of everyday life? To summarize, the model strives for students to explore, understand, and cope with life. In addition to Egan’s model, Schlossberg’s four S’s can be directly relevant to Cormier and Hackney’s individual transition model. This allows for helpers to understand how to assist a student with relationship building, assessment, goal setting, interventions, and termination. Each aspect of the model can be directly connected to the 4 S’s of situation, self, support, and strategies. Building rapport is extremely important with students across the transition model. Through this development the student affairs professional would have the opportunity to assess the student’s environment, internal and external resources, and how well they are coping with the transition which directly correlates to their situation. Along with assessment goals can be set to modify the environment, return the self to equilibrium, increase support, and develop an action plan to be followed during this moment of change for the individual. To enhance the experience of the student it is necessary to provide interventions throughout the transition process. It is important to support the student with strategies such as reframing, asset searches, support groups, and problem solving. As the 4 S model begins to close it is obligatory to plan the next steps and review what has happened with the student. By integrating the two models the helping relationship is deepened and more aligned with a counseling perspective.
In addition to understand Schlossberg’s theory in relation to other models, it is important to acknowledge its multicultural competences. The theory recognizes the importance of global community, the impact of technology, and understanding of cultural diversity and spirituality in the transition process. The theory has been revised to become more adapted to cultural shifts. An emphasis placed on the individual can be used to understand students of diverse backgrounds who may be encountering a change in their life. Despite the flexibility within the theory, there are also many problems associated with it. Overall it is highly complex and difficult to understand all its components and intricacies. More importantly, the lack of a formal assessment tool leads to a deficiency of validity within the theory. To enhance the legitimacy of the theory there needs to be an increase in research regarding transitions. Extensive data which is qualitative in nature is gathered through interviews, surveys, and observation. To enhance the validity of the transition theory quantitative data must also be acquired. Additional research is necessary to develop a more consistent way to measure variables. Schlossberg’s research is concentrated in the field of work but recognizes there are many other forms of transition within a person’s life. It may be useful to begin research involved with studying these other types of transition in light of her theory to see if transitional patterns occur to broaden the adaptability of the theory to other populations including higher education.

In one article Schlossberg directly correlates to college populations with a focus on managing adult transitions in the workplace. The study believes that basic behavior is determined by the transition that is occurring not the physical age, that people are motivated to learn and change in order to belong, and effective transition refers to the four S’s (Sargent,
Uniform treatment of students does not yield an identical transition based on age. Circumstances specific to each person affect the transition process. The greater a transition alters their sense of normalcy the more adversely they are affected. The age of a student does not determine the reaction to college transition. It is important to understand life changes before the technicalities of the transition. It is vital in counseling practices to not make assumptions regarding the student and their transition. Consideration of their background is the best approach to determine how that has affected the transition process. On conversations with students it may be helpful to identify recurring themes in their life and how the transition has impacted it. Utilization of this method encourages learning and growth and may result in easier acceptance of the life changes which are occurring.

A key component to a successful transition is obtaining a feeling of belonging and mattering. When a sense of belonging occurs there is a feeling of being a part of something bigger than the self. Those who are in the beginning of a transition may feel as if they are on the outside and do not have the sense of community that they perceive in their classmates and peers. As Schlossberg examined workers in transition she realized that employees who performed well were more involved and felt they had an influence in their workplace (Sargent A. & Schlossberg, N., 1988, p. 59). The same feeling of belonging and involvement is important to students making the transition to college. This is encouraged through a sense of community and involvement in extracurricular activities. Throughout the first few weeks of school clubs and programs actively recruit new members. Every student should be able to identify a group in which they share a common interest to enhance this sense of camaraderie. If a student desires a voice on campus they may find their niche in student government or programming
committees which directly enhance the student body. Not all students are able to transition smoothly to a new environment, and therefore do not access their resources to get through a transition. Much of the assessment is an understanding of the 4 S’s and how they may relate to strengthen known weaknesses. In addition to understanding the self and feeling a sense of community, there is a belief that the personal and professional lives remain separate. This separation does not usually occur and the same is true for the academic and personal. These two lives are intricately intertwined and may assist in the transition process. A change within the family may affect the student’s involvement or academic performance. Likewise a change to the student on campus it may affect the dynamics within the family. Each student is understood and educated holistically and therefore no one piece can be examined in isolation from another.

One of Schlossberg’s studies focuses on the concept of the revolving door of employees. Many employees who are hired leave in the first seven months of employment (Leibowitz, Z. & Schlossberg, N., 1991, p. 43). She attempts create strategies that assist with employment retention. While employers wish to retain their staff, institutions of higher education hope to retain their students. Data collected by conducting interviews, led Schlossberg to understand the needs of new employees during the adjustment process. When some of their expectations are not met it may lead to a period of reality shock. Frequently students come to campus with an understanding that there is an unwritten culture which cannot be found in a handbook. Students need to understand where they fit into the community both informally, as a member of the population and formally as a student of the institution. It is crucial for students to make connections within the campus community. There is a direct connection between how the
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student feels and the ease in how they adapt to a new environment. Most orientation programs are short and provide a plethora of information that is not always retained. This method may overwhelm a student who cannot simply absorb the information all at once: “the goal of such a process is to build a loyal, committed group of employees who understand the organization’s culture and resources and know how to facilitate their own growth and development in collaboration with others” (Leibowitz, Z. and Schlossberg, N., 1991 p. 46). The same can be true of a college or university program that mandates an orientation for new students to assist in the transition process. Often too much information is relayed in a short time frame.

Orientation strives to make new students comfortable and confident in their new environment. “New students should have a clear understanding of the overall purpose of higher education and how this general purpose translates to the institution they are attending. The roles, responsibilities, and expectations of students, faculty, and staff members, and families should be included” (“Orientation Programs: CAS Standards and Guidelines”, Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2011, p. 6). While all the information contained in orientation is important, much of it may be forgotten before the student arrives on campus in September. Orientation allows students to gain knowledge about resources available to them and their families, as well as easing the transition to the college life. During this experience students are introduced to the culture and expectations of the campus. Most orientations occur over the summer and include an overnight component which allows for the student to sample residence hall living before moving in for the fall semester. Orientation is important to learning: “The strongest predictor of an orientation’s impact on academic and
social learning was the students’ perceptions of ease in their transitions from high school to college” (Mayhew, 2009, p. 338). These resources and services, as well as the academic and social preparation, are there to assist students as they transition from high school to college. This transition can take time as it is a major event that is occurring in the student’s lives. While an anticipated event, diverse students will adjust and experience orientation differently. Orientation may help with the initial transition, but it is not in place once after the school year has begun and the students have returned to campus permanently. The program lays a foundation for transition that must be expanded upon by other departments through first year seminars, college access programs, and College101 courses.

Another area that has been examined in regards to the issue of transition is that of living learning communities. These communities are centered on a particular theme or academic discipline within a residence hall and promote involvement and transition to college both academically and socially. In the early 2000s Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Zaneeta E. Daver, Kristen E. Vogt, and Jeannie Borwn Leonard completed a study about the transition to college for first generation students who participated in living learning communities. After collecting their data, they concluded that those students who participated in living learning communities had structured activities, programming within their hall, and more interaction with faculty outside the classroom which led to a more successful social and academic transition as opposed to their peers in traditional halls. Their sample consisted of 34 colleges in 24 states and was broken into two pools of samples, one which was first generation students within a living learning community and one of students within traditional residence halls. When selecting the sample the researchers attempted to have a representation of those who were first generation
students. However, the majority of the sample were traditional aged first year students at a four year college. In regards to statistics for first generation students, many are low income, nontraditional, students of color. This information was difficult to match with statistics as the majority of the students elect to be commuters rather than residents when they attend a college or university. While there was a correlation between the living learning communities and successful academic and social transition it was considered low to moderate. Due to this result the researchers outlined possible future studies that could elaborate on the analysis and enhance the knowledge of these programs.

For many of the first generation students, the living learning community negatively influenced their social transition to college. When a close relationship with a faculty member was established they had less time to devote to peer relationships. A future study may address this topic to see if a successful academic transition for some students may be at the expense of the social transition. Another component of the study addressed academic and social transition. For many first generation students it did not appear that peer interactions and involvement were significant in the transition to college as there may be more of a focus on academics. For first generation students, no one in their immediate family has ever pursued a college degree. Many do not receive the needed support from home and enter college less academically prepared. As a result more time may be devoted to academics than peer interactions. Due to the sample the study cannot be generalized to the entire population and is considered exploratory due to the lack of longitudinal research. However, this an example of expanding the research in higher education and seeking answers in how best to serve students in the transition process. Each student and student population is unique. By better
understanding a particular population, the tools and strategies for their success in transitioning to college can be discovered and utilized.

While her theory focused on the world of work, there are multiple applications of Schlossberg’s theory to the higher education realm. Assessment is a general term which can refer to the formal, informal, or self-assessments that can assess transition. In particular assessment assists the students themselves to understand the transition process. To assist in a successful transition, a college should provide specialized services, education to the students that are relevant to the transition process, advocacy, appropriate campus resources, referrals, planned programs, networking and mentoring, and counseling. These transitional supports can benefit all students regardless of background. Schlossberg’s theory allowed for students to better understand themselves and those they are in contact with. By assessing development, the college or university can better understand the skills students must develop to successfully complete the multitude of transitions which occur.

Transition occurs throughout the college years for the majority of the students at an institution. They begin their college experience with the transition from high school to a new environment while finishing their time with transitioning to the next stage of their life after college graduation. Between these two bookends of transition, many more transitions exist for each student on an individual basis. As a student affairs practitioner, it is necessary to understand and implement the four s strategy with students as they encounter transitions. Ultimately it is necessary to understand the holistic and individual nature of each student while offering them sufficient challenge and support during these moments of change within their lives.
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References


