

Building Bridges: Why College Faculty Should Go Back to High School

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The transition from high school to the undergraduate world can be both exciting and anxiety-provoking for students. For the college-level faculty who welcome first-time students to their new environment, frustration is often felt when assumptions about what students should have learned prior to their arrival is not reflected in how they perform. A better understanding of the high school academic cultural environment promises to benefit both parties, as teachers of incoming college freshmen can more effectively help students make the academic transition to undergraduate education.

The teaching of psychology presents a unique opportunity for increased dialogue between high school teachers and college professors. The recent tremendous growth of psychology courses in secondary education has vastly increased the number of high school psychology teachers as well as the number of high school graduates with an exposure to the field (for a summary of this growth, see APA Education Directorate, 2008; Brandt, 2007). The interaction between these teachers and undergraduate faculty also continues to grow with blended membership in professional organizations (e.g., Society for the Teaching of Psychology) and mutual participation in areas of common interest, such as the College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology exam. Our goal is to contribute to the dialogue between high school and college-level teachers of psychology, by discussing how a better understanding of the high school and college environments can help us do a better job of teaching our students. We begin by taking a "macrocosm"-level look at some national data on entering freshmen students. Next, we focus on important differences in high school and college environments by bringing in examples from our own institutions.

The Macrocosm: Profiling First Year Students' Preparedness for Psychology

As psychologists, we are often (ruefully) reminded that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. To our chagrin, many first year students rely exclusively on strategies developed in their K thru 12 years during the first year of college. Some may adopt new ones, but we know from personal experience, anecdote, and articles

appearing in the Chronicle of Higher Education, among other sources, that many students struggle in their first year to deal with the freedom being away from home allows. This freedom, coupled with varying degrees of preparation for college-level work, poses challenges for students in and outside the psychology classroom.

A good way to understand the entering freshmen mindset is by consulting the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshmen survey, which is conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California at Los Angeles. Administered annually since 1966, the most recent data from 2007 are based on the weighted response of 272,036 first-time full-time students who matriculated in 356 of America's colleges and universities (HERI adjusts their responses to reflect those of the 1.4 million first-time freshmen who enrolled in college in fall 2007; see Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, & Korn, 2007).

Space constraints preclude detailed review of the HERI data here, however, we note some highlights (consult Pryor et al., 2007 for more information). We urge readers to consider how these data might impact the teaching of psychology to students in their first two years of college (most undergraduates take introductory psychology, doing so in the freshmen or sophomore year).

The good news

Many students arrive with positive learning habits: 58% reported supporting their opinions with logical arguments and 54% said they asked questions in their classes. Just under 47% revise their written work, however, only 20% accept failure as part of the learning process (for other "habits of mind," see Pryor et al., 2007). Almost 72% of respondents report doing volunteer work. Many foresee pursuing a Masters degree after their BA or BS, but less than 5% of these freshmen identified psychology as a probable major. Interestingly, only 0.5 % see college teaching as a worthy career option compared to elementary and secondary teaching. Of course, these are students' forecasts, not guarantees of what they will actually do in the future.

Some (possibly) bad news

Some students felt that they will need special tutoring or remedial work in English (9%), reading (5%), math (24%), science (11%), and writing (11%). Not surprisingly, Internet use is rife: 76% use it for doing research and homework. The modal time spent doing homework *per week* was only 3 to 5 hours. In contrast, considerable time was spent watching television, playing video/computer games, and using online social networks (e.g., Facebook, MySpace). As in past surveys, most students see themselves as "above average" where academic abilities, achievement drive, leadership, and intellectual and social confidence are concerned.

Microcosm I: Learning about Psychology in the High School Classroom

An easy assumption to make is that top academic performers also exhibit the best study habits. The first author teaches AP Psychology at York Community High School, a fairly large (2,500+ students) and successful suburban high school located in an affluent school district. Brigitte (not her real name) was a top academic performer at York last year. A National Merit Scholar, Brigitte ranked in the top 4% of her class and earned a 4.6 GPA on a 4.0 scale (the result of weighted honors and AP courses). She had six academic classes in her schedule (five AP) and was heavily involved in extracurricular activities. A prototype of a top high school student,

Brigitte challenges the assumption raised earlier; in a typical week, she studied only 6 to 10 hours out of class and reported skimming (rather than *reading*) all her reading assignments except for English.

Is Brigitte's profile typical of high school students nationwide? Probably not, but with a few exceptions, it is typical of AP Psychology students at York. The emerging irony of college-prep education is that top performing high school students who enjoy ideal secondary education settings seem to also develop study habits that are incongruous with the undergraduate expectations they will soon encounter. The same factors that lead to high school success also seem likely to beget first-year college students who will experience academic culture shock upon arrival on campus. A closer look at the AP Psychology classroom at York will further clarify the high school academic setting.

Across two AP Psychology sections with 47 students last year, six academic classes per semester was the norm. On average per week, students reported 9.4 hours of extracurricular involvement and only 10.7 hours of studying or doing homework out of class! Given that AP courses are designed to be curricular equivalents of college introductory level courses, it is disconcerting that students in AP classes are dedicating so little time to studying out of class. High school scheduling and course structure help explain why. In a traditional 7-hour school day, students spend 35 hours a week in school. With 50-minute class periods, York's AP Psychology students spend 25 hours a week attending their six academic classes. By adding in the time spent in extracurricular activities and studying out of class, the average AP Psychology student logs 55 school-related hours a week.

In comparison to undergraduate scheduling, the high school schedule reverses the independent studying to class time ratio. For every hour spent studying out of class, York's AP Psychology students spent 2.5 hours in class. This reversal mirrors the difference where learning occurs in the high school vs. the college setting. In an enlightening study of the cultural differences between high school and college, Appleby (2006) reported that college freshmen adjust to the reality that most of their learning will now take place out of the classroom. In contrast, 78% of York's AP Psychology students reported that most of their learning occurred in the classroom. This may be due simply to how much time is spent in class. York's AP Psychology classes meet daily for two 18-week semesters, racking up 144 student contact hours. In contrast, a typical undergraduate introductory psychology course registers 37.5 student contact hours. The large amount of time available in high school courses allows for increased opportunities to discuss material in great detail with students, the frequent checking for understanding, and the allocation of class time for independent studying and homework completion. As much as high school is said to prepare students for college, its academic framework allows for high dependency on learning in the classroom.

Microcosm II: The Reality of Teaching First Year Students in Introductory Psychology

High school students must navigate several major cultural changes when they enter college. Beginning students face a new social environment, one where they must learn to interact with a new group of peers. They also must learn to navigate a new physical environment; simply learning how to get from Point A to Point B in a new place takes time and effort, and can be cognitively tiring. They must learn "the ropes" at a new institution, with its own way of operating. On top of this, they must also adjust to changes in the academic environment in which they find themselves. First-

year students are thus faced with a tremendous variety of challenges all at once. As instructors, how does this impact what we do in our classes? What are the best ways to assist our students with this transition?

One way to begin is by educating ourselves about our beginning students. As college-level faculty, we often have little contact with the high schools from which our students come, and we may have little understanding of their previous academic experiences. However, many universities do have relevant information. For example, at James Madison University, the Division of Student Affairs and the Office of University Planning collect data from incoming students. During the 2007-08 academic year, 87% of these students reported that their overall average grades were B+ or better. Twenty-nine percent were in the top 10% of their high school class, and 75% reported that they intended to continue their education beyond the bachelor's degree. Numbers like these help us understand the academic mindset of our beginning students, and their level of expectation for their performance in college. These students have clearly been pursuing successful strategies in high school. From the student's perspective, there is no obvious reason to shift from academic strategies that have been working very well. And yet, many of them will need to learn new strategies; it is obviously not possible for all these incoming students to continue to perform at the same level they did in high school. Understanding the prior academic experiences of our students can help us as instructors be better prepared to deal with these students' behaviors, skill levels, and expectations.

As instructors of psychology, we can take advantage of our discipline to reach beginning students in meaningful ways. Topics and content covered in the introductory psychology class are readily applicable to the changes many of our first-year students are experiencing. Potential topics include material from biopsychology (sleep schedules and the effects of sleep deprivation on performance); memory and cognition (study strategies, critical thinking); social psychology (attribution, group behavior, attitude formation); health psychology (stress, resilience); diversity and individual differences; and developmental psychology, among other fields. In our experience, first-year students can easily bring up relevant examples from their current daily experiences as they adjust to their new culture.

Final Thoughts

We have one basic recommendation for teachers of first-year psychology students. Go back to high school. Or rather, get better acquainted with your students' high school experiences and with high school teachers of psychology. We have suggested seeking out information at your institution. If these data are not available, collect data on your own students' experiences – data you can use to adjust your course in ways that recognize the context from which the students approach your class. Reaching out to high school teachers of psychology and finding ways to coordinate resources between the two institutional levels will have a profound impact by improving the teaching of psychology in both environments. Guest lectures, shared poster sessions, and shared library access are small but meaningful gestures that can form the basis for further dialogue and mutual learning between teachers in both institutions. High school teachers will welcome the wealth of expertise and resources that college faculty can provide, and college faculty stand to gain invaluable insight into the academic culture their first-year students are emerging from.

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Author Notes

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