Learning from First-Year Fears: An Analysis of the Harvard First-Year Outdoor Program's "Fear in a Hat" Exercise

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During Harvard University's wilderness pre-orientation programs, students participate in an activity called "Fear in a Hat," in which students anonymously write down their greatest fears about attending college. Researchers collected and analyzed 1,016 responses from this activity and used Chickering and Reisser's (1993) psychosocial model of developing competence to categorize the responses. Because 40% of the data did not fit into this model, researchers used a different lens, categorizing fears by either task fears or relationship fears. The results indicated that students' fears are predominantly involved with issues of interpersonal competence (Chickering & Reisser model) or relationship fears (task/relationship model). These results contradicted assumptions at Harvard that students are mainly worried about not being able to handle the academic (task) challenges. The findings prompted the researchers to investigate the related literature, which demonstrated the importance of relationship issues in mediating and enhancing task behaviors.

In order to provide a beneficial, positive start to the college experience, institutions aim to understand the process of college orientation and students in transition. Just as no professor sets out to teach a boring and uninspired class, no orientation program hopes to have a mediocre impact on incoming students. The creation of powerful orientation experiences is informed by "data" collection and evaluation, some of it more formal (controlled research studies) than others (participant feedback and commentary). Such informal data can provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of orientation programs. In this spirit, this research project collected data that existed as part of an orientation activity but had not yet been analyzed to help better understand incoming students. Researchers looked at this data through different lenses to explore assumptions about orientation and support future programmatic decisions. The results led the authors to a rich field of research potentially relevant and important to orientation staff and professionals.

Smith and Brackin (2003) noted that the primary goal of a college orientation program is to facilitate the adjustment and success of entering students. Harvard University, like many institutions, offers a week of orientation programming before the beginning of the fall semester; Harvard also provides an opportunity for students to participate in pre-orientation programs. The various pre-orientation programs, which

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include a six-day wilderness trip and a six-day service program, are popular activities attended by 50% of all incoming students.

The First-Year Outdoor Program (FOP) is the largest of the pre-orientation options at Harvard, attracting about 300 incoming students. Two upperclass students lead a group of 8 to 10 first-year "Foppers" on multiple backpacking trips throughout New England the week before the formal orientation program begins. The FOP program began in 1978 when then-Dean of Freshman Henry Moses wanted to design an Outward Bound-type of program that would help students learn about teamwork in a challenging environment. In such an environment, students would be interdependent upon all group members for success.

Dean Moses' experiment has been realized, and over the years FOP trips have become more refined, with the development of common activities that have demonstrated success in helping students adjust to Harvard University. One of the most successful activities is called "Fear in a Hat," or FIH.

FIH is a very simple activity, but it is often mentioned in program feedback as one of the most important activities. Students gather in the evening after dinner (and a day of hiking) and are directed to write down their greatest fears about coming to Harvard. The responses are then placed in a hat to protect the anonymity of the participants. Leaders and group members read the responses aloud and the group discusses and recognizes the fears. Typically each member in the group comes to realize that everyone in transition is having some form of fear about starting college. This activity serves as a catalyst for the group to gain a new perspective on their own feelings of fear. It also helps individuals gain a deeper understanding of the concerns and struggles of their peers. Often FIH is a principal activity in reducing incoming students' fears and in promoting a group bond.

For many years the FIH activity took place on almost all FOP trips (about 30 trips a year). No one thought to analyze the fears to help inform the program; instead all the fears were tossed away at the end of the trip or sometimes even burned in a spontaneous ceremony the leaders or participants created.

Although no analysis of first-year fears—whether via the FIH data or any other source—had ever been conducted, the culture at Harvard held a common belief that the greatest fear of incoming students was not being able to handle the academics. A report on the Impact of Harvard College on Freshman Learning conducted in 1990 reported that "many students chronically worry that they are admissions office mistakes," a fear which typically lasted until mid-term grades were posted (Buchanan et al., 1990, p. 1). Also, in the dean's fall welcome address to incoming freshmen, lighthearted references were often made to how the staff understood that many students feared they might be admissions office mistakes. William C. Kirby, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science, would allay the students' "unfounded anxiety" about whether they "really belong here" by jokingly assuring them he had read all 1,650 admission essays (Kirby, 2005).

Fear of being the "admissions office mistake" seemed to fit well into Chickering and Reisser's (1993) developmental model. They proposed a seven-vector model, where each vector represented a path towards completion of a developmental task (Skipper,

2005). The first vector proposed that students arrive on campus seeking three specific types of competence in their new environments: intellectual competence, interpersonal competence, and physical competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). With this lens, the fear of being the admissions office mistake could be interpreted as a fear about one's "intellectual competence." Fears about intellectual competence seemed natural for students entering an academic environment, and if these types of fears truly predominate, then it may be prudent for orientation programs to address such fears early in the semester.

If competence is the major concern of college students in transition, then it seemed logical that the fears reported during the FIH activity could be categorized into the areas of intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence in keeping with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model. In addition to providing new insights into the greatest fears of students entering college, this study explored whether reported fears reflected the categories of Chickering and Reisser's competence model.

Methods

After discussing the issue of collecting data with the Harvard Institutional Review Board (IRB) representative, the researchers developed a method for collecting the responses. FOP leaders would present the FIH activity in a similar manner to the past, but also would ask students if they were willing to share their responses with researchers. Table 1 provides the directions given to all leaders for conducting the activity.

TABLE 1

Directions for the Fear in a Hat Activity

Fear in a Hat
Activity Description
This activity typically lasts an hour or more, so the group should be warm, well-fed, and ready for discussion.

Set-up or Briefing of the Activity
"This activity looks at some of our fears concerning college. It is called "Fear in a Hat." It provides an opportunity for us to talk about real fears shared in this group in an anonymous manner.

"How the activity works is that I will hand everyone a piece of paper and a pen. You will have a few minutes to reflect upon how you are feeling about going to college and to write down one of your biggest, greatest fears. Do not write your name or refer to yourself; the fear should be anonymous. Even if you do not mind disclosing your anonymity, it helps to protect other people's anonymity by not naming your own fear.

"When everyone has written down a fear a hat will be passed around the group. Everyone will place the fear in the hat. The fears will be mixed up and then the hat will be passed around the group

again. Each person will pull one fear out of the hat and read it out loud to the group. The group will then have time to discuss the fear, see if others identify with it and offer advice or understanding. After discussion, the format is repeated until all the fears in the hat are read out loud and discussed.

"This year all the fears written down from various college programs are being collected as part of a research project. At the end of the activity, I will put all the fears in a ziplock bag and send them to the researcher at the end of the course. The researcher will not be able to identify the group the fears came from. If you do not want to have your fear used as part of this project, please place an X mark or the word NO in the upper left hand corner. All these fears will be removed and destroyed before I hand the information over to our program director."

Hints for discussion:
- This activity can be powerful if the group takes it seriously and is willing to have discussion on other people's fears. When a group does not take it seriously, it may be best to gracefully bow out of the activity and try to reframe it later.
- Sometimes the discussion will focus too much on solutions or superficial optimism. If one of the fears is "flunking out of school" it may be better to recognize that these things do happen and offer support rather than denial that anyone in the group could ever fail at anything.

Potential questions and comments from the leader:
Has anyone here ever felt this fear?
Do others recognize this fear?
Maybe there is no solution to this feeling of fear right now, but I am glad it is out in the open where we can be sensitive to such a fear.

Overall: This activity is not a problem-solving activity as much as it is an activity where students tend to identify with other group members. Recognition of fears will inspire resolution, but the primary purpose of the activity is to promote understanding and the acknowledgment that we all have fears. Having fears when facing the uncertainty of a transition is perfectly normal and knowing others have them will often take some of the power away from individual fears. The group does not need to eliminate the fears of others; rather it is more powerful to accept the fears as being real and acceptable.

Purpose of the research: To look at the types of fears students on wilderness orientation programs have concerning transition to college. This is a preliminary study to help identify potential patterns. No specific research question has been formulated.

Leaders should frame the activity according to the directions and be sure to discuss the research paragraph with the group (the paragraph in bold above). After the activity, please remove the items marked for removal and turn the fears in at the collection table during debriefing.

Thank you for your involvement and assistance in collecting this information.

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The sample consisted only of participants on the wilderness orientation program (FOP) at Harvard University. The sample size for the participants was 250-300 participants per year for four years and represented about 18% of the incoming student population. Approximately 1,000 incoming students participated. It is difficult to obtain an exact number of participants since some individuals reported more than one fear. Also, some data were not included because it was lost due to paper getting wet or otherwise being unreadable. Some participants chose not to share their fears for this research, and some leaders did not use the activity with their groups. In the end, the researchers sorted through 1,018 fears reported over the 4-year period. No demographic information was collected as part of this study.

The fears were counted and originally sorted into categories based upon Chickering and Reisser's (1993) first vector of student development—developing competence. The initial categories used were interpersonal competence, physical competence, and intellectual competence; those fears not easily placed into one of the three categories were set aside in a miscellaneous category.

Many items were easily categorized, such as "I fear I cannot handle the academics" or "I fear I will not have the same levels of friendships I had back home." More difficult responses resulted in up to 30-minute discussions between researchers before categorization. Fifty-four items were written in a manner requiring considerable interpretation to categorize the fear, allowing a researcher to make an argument for a number of different categories. " I fear losing perspective" or "I fear getting left behind," for example, could refer to interpersonal, intellectual, or even physical fears. Those types of responses were eliminated from the study to guard against bias, so only fears that the researchers perceived as clearly fitting into a category were used in the final analysis. Both researchers read all fears that did not obviously fit into one of the existing categories to control for individual bias.

The fears in the miscellaneous category comprised about 40% of the data. These fears were sorted and resorted until five distinct categories developed, in addition to the three competence-based categories. These new categories, listed in Table 2, were composed of fears about the changing of relationships back home (Home), fear of ineffectively managing time (Time), fear of adjusting to a new role (Role), fear of losing one's sense of self (True to Self), and fear of making decisions and committing to the right opportunities on campus (Commitment). Any category with fewer than 20 responses was not reported since it represented less than 2% of the total responses, with the exception of physical competence, which was left in the survey because of its connection to Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model. In the end, five potential categories were eliminated because of low responses.

The analysis of fears using this methodology did not provide the scientific precision hoped for in most studies. In fact, the simple nature of the methodology provided a "blunt instrument" with many validity concerns. Still, the goals of this exploratory study were to provide guidance for future research exploring these trends, to collect data without changing the nature of the orientation activity, and to provide an exploratory analysis that may help wilderness orientation programs (and possibly other orientation

programs) develop new questions and see links to theory.

Results

The largest group of fears among the student participants in the wilderness orientation program was the group regarding interpersonal competence (N = 436). Fears about intellectual competence were the second largest category (N = 219), followed by a very small group of fears about physical competence (N = 16). It is important to note that all participants in the activity had completed 3 or 4 days of physical activity—backpacking or canoeing—before participating in the FIH activity. Such physical activity could have impacted the results regarding fears of physical competence.

TABLE 2

The Categories of First-Year Student Fears at Harvard University

Category	Number of fears	Description
Intellectual	219	This category included fears such as "not getting good grades," "not being able to handle the work," and "that I am not really qualified to be here."
Interpersonal	436	This category included students' fears in relating to and being competent with their peer group. Students who reported social fears noted such concerns as "I fear I will not make good friends," "getting along with my roommate and other people in my entry way," and "loneliness."
Physical	16	This category was important in looking at Chickering and Reisser's (1993) lens of competence, yet few students reported a physical fear. The students who did report a physical fear reported being afraid of "gaining the freshman 15," "being able to make the jump to college athletics," and "getting out of shape and not having enough time for working out."
Home	103	A large number of students reported being afraid of how leaving for college was going to change their relationships back home with family, friends, and significant others. Although students were entering a new and often times exciting time of their lives, many students were also grieving a change in their status in family and other social dynamics. These students feared not having "all the comforts of home" and "losing touch with my high school friends."

Time (Use of Time)	83	This category encapsulated students' fears pertaining to the consequences of how they chose to spend their time. Within the category were two strong, yet slightly differentiated subcategories. The first, *taking advantage of opportunities*, reflected the students' desire not to miss out on various resources, activities, and events during their college years. Often students used phrases similar to "I don't want to let my time slip by" in order to convey their desire to "maximize the potential of school." Students feared that obstacles such as a lack of time, too many choices, or laziness would prevent them from managing time effectively and taking full advantage of the many opportunities presented in college. The second subcategory, *balance*, reflected the fear that one or more aspects of life would consume a disproportionate amount of time or energy compared to other aspects of life that the students valued. Very frequently, students noted the tension between the academic, social, extracurricular spheres. Some feared an overall loss of balance in their lives by "spreading myself too thin" and participating in more activities for which they actually had time.
Commitment (Fear of Commitment)	82	Students in this category describe fear of making a commitment that will lead to unintended consequences, like wasting time in the wrong major, or ending up in a career track they are not passionate about. Although college provides many opportunities, it also requires saying no to many opportunities. This category had four major subthemes, including committing to (a) the correct major/concentration, (b) the right classes, (c) the right extracurricular activities, and (d) career track. Fears such as "choosing or wasting time in the wrong concentration (major)" and "not finding a subject I feel passionate about" were common. Career-related fears such as "figuring out what I want to do with my life" were also frequently noted in this category.
Role (Loss of Previous Role)	22	This category refers to students worrying about "not measuring up" to other students, and being anxious about "being another face in the crowd and not distinguishing myself from the average Joe." Harvard students, by the nature of the admissions process, are distinguished high school students. This fear represents a feeling of loss of this type of role. Students noted a fear of being "mediocre," "incompetent," and "inadequate" when compared to their college peers.
True to Self	22	Fears in this category represented a tension between the inevitable personal change affected by the college socialization process and the students' desire to retain elements of their personality that they perceived to be essential to their own core. Students feared "losing myself" and becoming someone who they would currently disapprove of (e.g. "a pompous ass"). Some students feared that the career, social, or academic expectations of others would lure them away from their "true" personal passions, goals, and values. Overall, this category depicts a fear that, in the college environment, "being me" may be difficult.

TABLE 2 (CONT.)

Miscellaneous	54	The reported fears in this category failed to gather more than 20 responses within a category. The largest categories included fear of cold weather, lack of finances, and fear of having chosen the wrong school. The remaining fears tended to be very specific ("I am worried about understanding the TAs") or so general that the fears were difficult to categorize without reading into the response (for example, "I fear college"). Some notable fears centered around personal safety, living in a city, and prejudice.
Total	1,037	

Although the common belief is that Harvard students' greatest fear is academic failure, data from this research tell a different story. Harvard students seem most afraid of the social challenges presented to them when they transition to the college. Interpersonal fears (N = 436) are twice as prevalent as intellectual fears (N = 219), and the argument can be made that the category "Home" also represented an interpersonal fear, resulting in interpersonal fears composing more than 50% of all the fears reported in the eight different categories.

It is interesting to note that very few students, fewer than 2%, reported fears related to physical competence (N = 16). Those who did report fears about physical competence predominately reported fears about gaining weight during the first year.   Worries about the changing relationships status back home (N = 103) and fears about being able to use time effectively in college (N = 83) were larger categories, each reported by about 10% of the students in this study. The category "Fear of Commitment" (N = 82) was one of three fears outside of the Chickering and Reisser (1993) model with fewer than 100 responses. The loss of role (N = 22) and being true to oneself (N = 22) were the smallest categories outside the model.

After creating new categories it became apparent that these new categories of fear corresponded with some of the other six vectors in Chickering and Reisser's (1993) model. For instance, the predominant themes discussed in the category, "Home," centered around the fear of a change in family relationships or losing established friendships. This appeared similar to Chickering & Reisser's third vector, "moving through autonomy toward interdependence"; it involves "separation from parents and proceeds through reliance on peers, non-parental adults, and occupational or institutional reference groups" (p. 47). In the Chickering & Reisser model, the student comes to a compromise between the dual needs of independence and inclusion. Although this vector partly described the "Home" category, many of the fears in this category represented a fear of changing social relationships rather than a true fear of emotional or cognitive independence.

Similarly, the "True to Self" fears seemed to echo Chickering & Reisser's (1993) "developing integrity" vector, which describes the maturation of students' value-making schemes. As proposed by Chickering and Reisser, students become aware of new value systems, try out new values and discard some old ones, and finally assemble a new moral "wardrobe" (p. 51). Many of the fears in the "True to Self" category were fears about this disruption of the value system, for example, "…being/staying the person my parents have raised me to be." Responses like "I'm afraid I won't live up to my own personal expectation of excellence" or "losing myself" fit less comfortably into Chickering & Reisser's "developing integrity" vector. Although other linkages were observed, none of Chickering & Reisser's vectors entirely captured all of the fears expressed in a specific category without significantly narrowing the scope. Since the "developing competence" vector was the best fit for much of the data, and the other developmental vectors only partially captured the remaining data, the researchers chose not to place the other fears into categories based on Chickering and Reisser's other developmental vectors.

New Lens

Although competence provides a home for 60% of the data, a broader lens may be necessary in order to provide a useful framework for all the data. Research on conflict resolution and negotiation often uses a task/relationship lens, recognizing problems as having both a task component and a relationship component, both needing attention for healthy and productive conflict resolution (Pearson, Ensley, & Amason, 2002; Pinkley, 1990; Priem & Price, 1991; Wall & Nolan, 1986). Transition to college can be viewed as a form of conflict, upsetting the family structure, changing the role of the individual, and often involving an unsettling of the social dynamic. Orientation programs are, in effect, structured programs to help resolve some of the uncertainty associated with transitional conflict.

How Relationship Issues Relate to Task Issues

Viewing the results of this study through this new lens, the researchers grouped the responses as either task fears or relationship fears. Interpersonal fears and fears about leaving home were both clearly relationship-oriented, each focusing on the formation of new social ties or the maintenance of old ones. "Loss of Previous Role" fears were relational in nature since they involved students comparing themselves to their larger peer group. The 22 fears in the "True to Self" category concerned students' perceived relationships between their current and future selves.

Task fears were related to concerns regarding the completion of a goal or development of a technical skill. Although these fears are not always clearly distinct, fears in the categories of "Intellectual" and "Physical" were designated as task-related fears. "Use of time" fears and fears concerning commitment did not clearly fit into a "task" or "relationship" grouping. Researchers reread each fear in these two categories. They determined that 71 commitment fears were task-oriented (e.g., "Taking the right classes

and making a good start") while four were relationship-oriented (e.g., "…trying to get to know professors well and standing out"), and seven either could not be categorized or fit into both task and relationship groups. Thirty-three fears in the "Time" category were task-related (e.g., "organization" and "time management"). Another 50 fears in this category contained both task and relationship elements and often expressed a tension between the two. For example, many students feared "balancing academics and social life" and "finding balance between work and fun."

According to the results of the current study, relational issues tend to dominate during students' transition to college, as almost two thirds (65%) of categorized fears contained a relational component, as highlighted in Table 3.

TABLE 3

Student Reported Fears organized by Task, Relationship, and Task/Relationship Balance by Category (N = 976)*

	Task	Relationship	T/R Balance
Intellectual	219	—	—
Interpersonal	—	436	—
Physical	16	—	—
Home	—	103	—
Time	33	—	50
Commitment	71	4	—
Role	—	22	—
True to Self	—	22	—
TOTAL	339	587	50

*Miscellaneous fears (n=54) were not grouped as task or relationship and 7 "Commitment" fears did not fit into any category.

These findings point to interesting linkages in the research literature on a psychological need for belongingness. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis states that people have a strong motivation to form and sustain supportive social bonds. In fact, Baumeister and Leary argue quite soundly that the need to belong is a basic and fundamental need (1995).

Because first-year students at Harvard are predominately late adolescents, the importance of peer relationships in developing a sense of belonging may be particularly vital (McDevitt & Ormond, 2004). For example, research on college students' development of social support structures has theorized that first-year and sophomore college students may use peers as their main source of guidance on campus, despite the many advising structures embedded in the institution (Bell, 2005). This provides an

extra challenge to the institution since information and messages from peers may carry more weight and have more impact upon students than official messages from the institution.

More importantly, students' fears of not connecting with peers may have an impact upon their ability to succeed academically. Recent research by Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss (2002) found that students who fear social exclusion show significant decreases in their ability to complete complex cognitive tasks such as effortful logic and reasoning. In these studies, social exclusion was defined as lacking a perception of close, meaningful relationships (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002). Social exclusion is not a unique or rare occurrence but a common experience that affects many college students (Twenge, 2001). Interestingly, although the findings in the Baumeister et al. (2002) study demonstrated a decrease in cognitive ability when students fear social exclusion, as soon as the fear is lifted intellectual performance increases. Baumeister et al. (2002) found that social exclusion primarily impacts a student's ability to recall information, not necessarily the ability to understand or intake information. Fear of social exclusions seems to have a particular effect upon cognitive processing during the act of recall.

Several studies have also found peer isolation to be correlated to academic failure and student attrition (Astin, 1973; Faugh, 1982; Husband, 1975; Krebs & Liberty, 1971; Tinto & Cullen, 1973; Reyes, 1989; Wehlage, 1989), while corresponding studies have found student integration to be important for success in college (Klem & Connell, 2004; Parke & Welsh, 1998). Similarly, numerous studies identify social support and/or peer support as positive aids to students coping with transitional issues (Gore & Aseltine, 2003; Gore, Aseltine, & Colten, 1992; House, Umberson, & Lanis, 1988).

The Current Focus on Task Competence

Task fears were conceptualized as those fears that may be partly assuaged by the dissemination of technical information about the school through orientation workshops and information sessions. From a student affairs perspective, developing task competence is easy to structure and objectively assess. A student will usually receive formal and structured feedback on how they are performing academically; however, students' interpersonal interactions are not graded and feedback is almost always informal. Likewise, a student who worries about finding the right major or career—a relatively broad and ambiguous task—will nonetheless have intermediate formal feedback along the way; a student hoping to enter medical school, for example, will need to take organic chemistry. A lack of competence in organic chemistry may provide a turning point in how the student views his or her future career, while a feeling of competence in organic chemistry combined with enjoyment of carbon molecules may lead a student to "find" a career path.

Workshops to help students connect socially and develop interpersonal competence are obviously more difficult to create and assess, but workshops on how to manage time, study effectively, take exams, choose the best classes, and manage extracurricular activities do have fairly well-tested and well-utilized structures that can be taught and

assessed. Although task-related workshops are useful to students, the researchers question whether students in transition are too preoccupied with the social aspects of their college experience to truly benefit from an orientation workshop focused heavily on task issues. This is not to conclude that the beginning of college need focus only on the social; however, these findings suggest the importance of increased sensitivity to the potential needs of first-years in the way workshops are conducted.

In a recent study, Capps and Miller (2006) asked high school guidance counselors and administrators what should be included in a college orientation program. As a group the respondents favored task items, such as identifying the financial and commitment costs of going to college, learning academic policies, and providing information on how to make decisions as being the most important elements of an orientation program (Capps & Miller, 2006). In fact, such relational issues as developing healthy relationships with faculty, staff, and peers were rated as the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth concerns out of the twenty items (Capps & Miller, 2006). It is unlikely that these administrators do not favor positive social integration of students to the campus, but perhaps the high school administrators trust that the students will make connections without formal programming, as may have been evidenced by their social capabilities in high school. Or perhaps the high school administrators are suspicious of whether social inclusion can be easily and authentically programmed by administrators.

As previously suggested, achievement of interpersonal "relationship" competence, however, may be linked with development of intellectual "task" competence. It is apparent from the literature that fostering students' social connections is beneficial to the academic goals of the institution. Although the academic goals of a college or university must undoubtedly be the central goals of the institution in the long run, the results of this study indicate that developing social support may be of utmost concern to the first-year student during transition. As the above literature demonstrates, satisfying the need for social support creates an atmosphere more conducive to the academic and intellectual goals of the school.

The issue for practitioners is how to create a balance between the more task-oriented goals of the university and the relationship-oriented needs of the incoming student. Without the latter, the ability to realize the former may be compromised. Universities, then, must realize that the central goal of their institutions may be different from the central goal of their orientation programs. Appropriately timed programming that is primarily focused on relationship-related needs rather than task-related needs will help foster an environment where the university can better support students academically and intellectually. Empirically examining first-year students' self-reported needs, as this study explored, may help university administrators see the value of a more "bottom-up" than "top-down" focus for creating useful orientation goals. If the goal of orientation is ultimately to prepare students to succeed academically (Smith & Bracken, 1993), eliminating fears of social exclusion through orientation programs may potentially accelerate academic adjustment.

Conclusion

Students in transition, such as those entering college, will naturally have fears. The existence of many self-help books and Web sites focused on college transition confirm this. Although a preponderance of intellectual fears seems logical because nurturing students academically is a primary purpose of college, students who participated in the wilderness pre-orientation program at Harvard had many more fears about the social dynamic they were entering. Recent evidence suggests that social fears, when involving a fear of social exclusion, also have significantly detrimental effects on specific types of cognitive functioning and, potentially, successful transition to the university.

Although this study looks at one set of data (students' self-reported fears) at one particular college, it does raise interesting issues for orientation program coordinators to ponder when considering the dynamics and social climates on their own particular campuses. It is unknown whether this sample is representative either of Harvard (all participants were on the wilderness orientation program) or of other college campuses. By sharing and analyzing an activity with a history of great success at Harvard University, however, this research does raise interesting questions to guide the constant search for more effective ways to design orientation programming.

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