

**Engaging Sophomore Students with Liberal Learning:
Focused Exploration through Academic Advising**

A White Paper for the Teagle Foundation Initiative
“Fresh Thinking for Liberal Education: Knowledge and Know-How for Student Learning”

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Abstract

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This report offers recommendations for instituting initiatives that allow sophomores to more successfully focus on their exploration of liberal learning at small colleges. It summarizes advising practices including advising as learning, advising in sophomore gatherings, sophomore courses, and faculty-student collaborative research. Colorado College, Connecticut College, St. Lawrence University, and Skidmore College carried out a three-year study of sophomores and liberal learning. We collected quantitative and qualitative data on sophomore engagement and piloted sophomore advising initiatives.

Working Group

Our working group collaborated on all project activities. The project leader coordinated group meetings, budgetary matters, and report writing. Each co-leader coordinated activities at his or her respective school.

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Introduction

The “sophomore slump” is a well-recognized period of transition for many college students. After an initial focus on exploration in the first year, some students become disengaged from academic and social activities, which results in many of these disengaged students leaving college by the end of the second year. Earlier research on sophomore issues focused on retention and noted, for instance, lower retention rates for first-generation students (e.g., Ishitani 2006)*. Such studies influenced the development of programs to identify and support students at risk of leaving college. Some research shows that the retention rates become higher for students who commit to their undergraduate education by declaring a major. Larger institutions have tended to address the retention problem by requiring students to declare a major sooner, thus shortening the time between the exploration phase and commitment to a major area of study (Graunke 2005; Hannah 2007). At small liberal arts institutions, however, this strategy does not seem to address students’ expectations about broadly exploring subjects across the liberal arts curriculum before declaring a major (e.g., Gansemer et al. 2007; Juillerat 2000; Pattengale 2000; Shaller 2005, 2007).

Recent studies on the issues facing sophomores who stay in college identify a number of institutional challenges that require institutional solutions (e.g., Hunter et al. 2010; Tobolowsky and Cox 2007). Sophomores often encounter an intensified curriculum; but, at the same time, they feel as if they are in an academic betwixt and between zone—no longer receiving the attention of a first-year student and not yet recognized as a declared major. Sophomores are searching for a sense of self and identity, and they reflect intensely on questions such as “Who am I?” and “Why am I still here?” They question their relationships with peers, and in some cases fall victim to negative behavioral patterns such as poor time management and substance abuse. Sophomores also ponder major selection issues and options for careers and graduate education, often within institutional settings that offer less support and guidance than was offered in the first year. The combination of more challenge, lack of support, and lack of focus leads to decreased motivation and lack of direction in their academic pursuits. By enhancing advising, institutions can provide students with the direction they need to succeed in the second year of college and beyond.

Researching Sophomore Experiences

Colorado College, Connecticut College, St. Lawrence University, and Skidmore College carried out a three-year collaborative study of sophomore engagement with liberal learning. We piloted sophomore dialogue and advising initiatives and collected quantitative and qualitative data on sophomore engagement. We shared results during working group meetings, conference presentations, and campus site visits, and we drew from the insights of academic consultants with expertise in advising and research in higher education (see acknowledgements for the names of the consultants). This report summarizes our advising initiatives and outlines

* The project bibliography reflects the evolution and scope of research on sophomores.

recommendations for enhancing academic advising programs for sophomores at small liberal arts colleges.

Our project explored sophomore experiences at four institutions with similar characteristics. We are private and selective undergraduate institutions with small student populations (1,900-2,400 students), similar student/faculty ratios (9:1-11:1), and high retention rates. Our colleges have established first-year programs, and we expect students to explore a liberal arts curriculum before declaring a major by the end of the second year. The first-year programs have been successful in enhancing student engagement and achievement; but for many students, the impact of these programs has not carried through to the second year. As a result, we identified a growing need to enhance the second-year experiences of our students.

As part of the Teagle Foundation's "Fresh Thinking" initiative, our sophomore project had several goals:

- Investigate sophomore engagement and achievement at our institutions.
- Compare institutional data on retention and engagement.
- Pilot sophomore advising initiatives.
- Assess the impact of pilot initiatives and recommend programs for liberal arts colleges.

Retention and Engagement

Our project included participation of the institutional research offices at each school, and we compared various data points to identify differences and similarities in the educational settings (see Nugent and Zimmerman 2009). At our four schools, data shows high retention rates for first-year students and sophomores. For the Class of 2010 (entering Fall 2006), the first-year retention rate at the four schools ranged from 88% to 94%, and the second year retention rate ranged from 82% to 90%. There were slight tendencies for higher retention rates for females, white students, and students eligible for Pell Grants. And while sophomore retention rates were relatively high overall, the data demonstrated that the majority of the students who leave our institutions do so after completing one year of college and before completing the second year. In addition, the sophomore retention issue points to broader concerns for the students who choose to stay at our institutions even if they too are less motivated.

To better understand engagement issues, we compared data from the four schools from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for 2006 and 2007. The survey was given to first-year students for the classes of 2010 and 2011 (depending on the institution). For the item asking how often students "talked about career plans with a faculty member or advisor," the first-year students tended to respond "never" or "sometimes." Asked to evaluate "the quality of academic advising received at your institution," our students tended to answer "good" to "fair" when compared to peer institutions (Carnegie Peer Group: Baccalaureate Colleges—Arts and Sciences). There were similar trends across the four schools, which suggested broadly similar

educational experiences. Further, the similarities in responses suggest that our pilot sophomore initiatives would likely be effective at schools that shared our profiles.

Sophomore Engagement Survey

By using multiple research methods across the schools, we sought to create a rich data set for comparison. The four colleges collaborated on developing a survey instrument to gather more specific information on sophomore advising and intellectual development. Connecticut College and Colorado College administered the survey for two years, while St. Lawrence University incorporated some survey questions in a separate questionnaire submitted to first-year students and sophomores. Skidmore College used the survey to design a qualitative study of sophomore experiences. The survey consisted of the following sections: (a) frequency and types of interactions with their faculty advisors; (b) experiences and challenges of the sophomore year; (c) involvement on campus; (d) satisfaction with experiences; (e) Adult Trait Hope Scale (Snyder, et al., 1991); (f) Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, et al., 2006); and (g) Self-Authorship Survey (Pizzolato 2005).

Our findings indicate that the levels of hope decrease from first year to second year and that students' levels of energy for pursuing a goal also decreases (for more details, see Tetley 2009). At the same time, students' problem-solving orientation increases, indicating that the sophomores are beginning to rely less on authority for decision making. The second-year students also score high on the scale of searching for meaning in life, which underscores that the second year of college is often a time for personal reflection on future pursuits and goals. The students ranked the most challenging situations for the second year as exploration of identity or sense of self and solidifying a social group. The survey suggests that students at our institutions experience decreased motivation to continue their studies, while at the same time they experience more independence and reflection, demonstrating preparedness to take on more challenging activities beyond the classroom.

From our qualitative research, we heard students express this dual experience of feeling more confident (first quote below) while at the same time encountering more challenge (second quote):

I think everyone has more confidence by the time their sophomore year comes around ... more confidence just in terms of how to handle the college thing, how to work your time. Also, friendships ... seem more genuine ... by the time second year comes. You really know the people; ... you've been through good and bad times with them. – *Skidmore College sophomore*

[The second year is challenging] because of the increase in homework, sort of balancing time management between social activities and school work. ... I feel like a lot of college is the social aspect and kind of stepping outside of your boundaries, trying new things; ...[the difficulty is] trying to do that while getting work done and having an academic focus or finding an internship. – *Skidmore College sophomore*

In a Connecticut College survey, second-year students expressed the pressures and frustrations they experience:

Even only a sophomore, I already feel the pressure to decide long term career goals— where I want to go to grad school, what exactly I want my job to be. Also pressures with trying to lay out an exact schedule to ensure all requirements are done, and possibly study abroad. – *Connecticut College sophomore*

My questions and frustrations were more related to a wondering how I was going to apply some of the things I'm learning in school in my life in the future, and if my (financial) investment in college will be worth it. Could I end up just as happy and successful in the future if I went to a community college instead? – *Connecticut College sophomore*

Focused Exploration Through High-Impact Educational Practices

At small liberal arts schools with high retention rates, addressing student engagement must go beyond increasing retention rates. Such institutional efforts also must avoid relying on a first-year program to carry a student through the first two years of college. Our research and our personal experiences lead us to conclude that students expect to explore broadly across multiple academic areas for two years before declaring a major. They also expect to have more meaningful academic relationships with their peers, advisors, and instructors, and they are eager to take on more challenging kinds of projects that are usually reserved for declared majors.

In this educational context, institutions are best served by increasing student academic engagement and interaction with advisors and instructors. Molly Schaller (2005, 2007) explains that sophomores often benefit from “focused exploration” as an intermediary phase between first-year exploration and the declaration of a major by the junior year. During this focused exploration phase, institutions can enhance student engagement by providing high-impact experiences and encouraging second-year students to reflect on post-college planning before committing to a major area of study. George Kuh (2008) lists the following high-impact educational practices that promote student retention and student engagement:

- first-year seminars and experiences
- common intellectual experiences
- learning communities
- writing-intensive courses
- collaborative assignments and projects
- undergraduate research
- diversity/global learning (including study abroad)
- service learning, community-based learning
- internships

- capstone courses and projects

At many liberal arts colleges, including our own institutions, a few of these practices are focused on first-year students (first-year seminars, writing-intensive courses); and the majority of the opportunities are offered most often to juniors and seniors with declared majors (e.g., study abroad, research, internships, capstone courses). Fewer high-impact opportunities are developed specifically for second-year students. Our analysis of NSSE data and our survey data suggests that sophomores are most engaged when they are involved with close advising and mentoring relationships with faculty, especially in high-impact educational experiences that go beyond classroom learning and involve independent research and application of knowledge. Our project explored how to provide activities that promote engagement.

Pilot Programs

We piloted several programs at each institution, often borrowing ideas and practices from each other as well as other colleges that are in the process of developing sophomore programs. We modeled our initial efforts after Colorado College's "Sophomore Jump" program, the longest-running sophomore program among our group. Our primary emphasis was on enhancing the faculty-based advising programs for sophomores. Specifically, we sought ways to help faculty and students have meaningful and reflective conversations about a liberal arts education. In addition, the schools sponsored sophomore dinner series, sophomore seminars, and sophomore social programs. The initiatives also included faculty development workshops, and we supported a faculty-student collaborative research project on sophomore experiences.

Advising as Learning

We drew from research promoting advising as learning (Hemwall and Trachte 2005) as well as the Learning Partnership Model (Baxter Magolda 2004) to promote deliberative and meaningful advising conversations. Colorado College took the lead in applying a Learning Partnership Model for advising sophomores, and the other schools have begun using elements of this approach. In this learning-centered approach, the curriculum of academic advising facilitates student learning about the mission (core values) of the college; at the same time, advising is a means of achieving the goals embedded in the institutional mission statement and closely related documents. As part of the advising process, students learn both lower and higher thinking skills. Academic advisors view students as actively constructing their understanding of their liberal arts experiences, and advising programs incorporate how the individual student learns. Advisors foster reflective conversations in which students have the opportunity to express, justify, and discuss individual goals and ideas (Baxter Magolda and King 2008). In this context, the advisor guides the learner and helps the learner recognize and benefit from challenges and contradictions encountered in the second year (see also Appleby 2008).

At Colorado College, the 18 faculty participants worked with 108 sophomores to encourage them to participate together in a variety of activities, including faculty-sophomore dinners and discussions. Colorado hosted seven faculty-sophomore dinners, with more than 115

sophomores taking advantage of the opportunity to enjoy a nice meal, listen to a faculty member talk about his or her intellectual autobiography, have informal conversations and build relationships with other sophomore students, and learn about potential majors and other areas of study. Feedback on the faculty development program has been positive. As one Colorado advisor noted:

I was able to meet with all of my sophomore advisees and talk about issues around declaring, study abroad, broadly defined course selection issues (without the context of actually picking classes), and how things are going overall. It was SO clear that this is THE perfect time for intentional advising. Whether it leads to “self authorship” I cannot say; but I really enjoyed the conversations with advisees. I always do, but these meetings were substantively different than those organized around either course selection or getting a letter of recommendation out of me or something like that. I hope we institutionalize some kind of sophomore advising.... Thanks for the opportunity!

Following Colorado College’s lead, the other schools have enhanced institutional support for sophomore advising. For example, Connecticut College changed the title of the Associate Dean of Studies to Associate Dean of Studies for Freshman and Sophomores, and that position has responsibility for coordinating sophomore advising events. St. Lawrence University offered a faculty development workshop on sophomore advising. Skidmore College offered pedagogy sessions about the learning-centered approach for sophomore advising. In addition, Skidmore created the new position of Student Academic Development Coordinator, which bridges the First-Year Experience program with the Office of Academic Advising. This position supports the Teagle-funded sophomores project as well as other programs for students in transition. For instance, the coordinator promotes national merit-based scholarship competitions and seeks ways to involve sophomores in preparing for them. Each school has also explored ways to partner with the sophomore class council representatives to develop information sessions about the challenges and opportunities for second-year students.

Sophomore Gatherings

Colorado College’s “Sophomore Jump” program organized sophomore gatherings, including dinners and information fairs. Following the positive feedback from faculty and students, Connecticut College and St. Lawrence developed year-long dinner dialogue series for sophomores. The dinner series covered a range of topics that encouraged students to ask questions about their liberal arts education and take on the challenges of high-impact educational activities. Connecticut’s dinner series had several topics for each semester. Fall semester topics included: (a) orientation and academic centers; (b) study abroad; and (c) choosing a major and a major advisor. Spring semester topics included: (a) study abroad revisited, with newly returned juniors talking about their experiences; and (b) getting ready for junior year.

At some sophomore gatherings, the reflective discussions included faculty sharing their intellectual journeys to demonstrate to students the life-long learning process involved in a liberal arts education. Colorado College also included faculty-sophomore dinners as part of the Learning Partnership program’s goal to enhance the reflective advising conversations.

Sophomore Courses

Three of the institutions piloted sophomore courses. St. Lawrence University offered sophomore seminars in the following academic areas: economics, English, government, history, philosophy, and nondepartmental studies. The seminars, half-unit courses meeting once a week for 90 minutes, are reflective dialogues designed to capture and support the “focused exploration” that characterizes students in the sophomore year (Schaller 2005, 2010) and are explicitly connected to academic advising. Discussions focus on one or two books, and the sophomores are asked to reflect on their individual relation to the liberal arts, their educational choices, and their intellectual direction. As part of the seminar experience, sophomores have opportunities to reflect and discuss their personal goals and receive advice and guidance from a faculty member who shares their intellectual interests. The sophomore-only academic experience allows students to focus their reflection as they prepare to declare a major and explore various postbaccalaureate options.

At Skidmore College, students in a sociology research seminar conducted qualitative research on sophomore experiences at the college. The student researchers gained skills in carrying out the project, and they reported high levels of commitment with a project that focused on better understanding the school and allowed them to make recommendations for institutional change. At the end of each semester, the student researchers presented their findings to administrators and faculty involved in the advising program.

Also at Skidmore, the Teagle initiative provided support for an interracial dialogue seminar for sophomores, as part of a broader Intergroup Relations (IGR) initiative. Other IGR seminars were piloted for first-year and upperclass students. Assessment data indicates that the sophomores were most receptive to discussing interracial issues, and they made the most gains in acquiring intercultural knowledge and skills compared to students from other class years. This suggests that sophomores are prepared for the challenges of intergroup dialogues, and they benefit from small, intensive dialogues that allow them to explore their personal identity in relation to their peers.

Colorado College developed a new sophomore course that engaged students in reflecting on the purpose and meaning of liberal learning. The course engaged students in e-journal reflections and explored multiple theories from self-psychology and higher education as a context for understanding their own experiences as sophomores. Readings including Heinz Kohut’s *Theory of the Self*, Heidegger’s *Theory of Authenticity*, and *The Odyssey* challenged students to become more engaged in their own intellectual development and encouraged them to actively reflect on their choices during the second-year of college.

Faculty-Student Collaborative Research

In the summer, Skidmore supported groups of faculty and students to carry out collaborative research on sophomore students. The faculty-student teams analyzed the advising issues that emerged in the qualitative data as well as existing survey data. The research indicates that sophomores build relationships with faculty advisors in a manner similar to the way they build relationships with other faculty and friends. Students get to know the faculty members,

and then decide whether or not their relationship is genuine before developing a deeper advising relationship. As one Skidmore sophomore described the qualities of a good faculty advisor:

... a professor who I feel most comfortable with, who I can actually talk to about my classes and maybe things outside of my classes, because ... college gets really stressful a lot of time and you're going to need someone to talk to. And if your major advisor is that person you can really talk to, then I think that that would be the best fit for a student.

Our findings also indicate that students seem most engaged with their education when they have a good balance between academic and social experiences. For instance, students who are doing well academically and are well connected to faculty and peers express a high sense of direction and excitement about their studies. Students who are either not doing well academically or who are not socially connected (or both) express the usual characteristics of sophomore slump—lack of motivation. This is particularly the case when they see themselves as lacking meaningful relationships or when they are enrolled in introductory courses that seem to repeat the experiences of their first year.

Recommendations

Our sophomore project encourages institutions to enhance liberal learning through deliberative and intentional academic advising—be it reflective conversations between faculty advisors and students or group discussions inside and outside the classroom. By focusing on advising as learning, we believe faculty advisors can enhance sophomore engagement and guide second-year students toward meaningful activities.

More important, liberal arts colleges need to have an institutional commitment to support sophomores through their college journey. Our project highlighted the tendency for small liberal arts institutions to overlook second-year issues. Indeed, our institutions have tried to address retention and engagement issues by enhancing the first-year experience with elaborate orientations, first-year seminars, peer mentors, and suggested classes for first-year students. Yet at the same time, our institutions provided little comparable support, structure, or direction for the second year. Some students who either leave college after the first year or who experience the sophomore slump may have had a positive first-year experience; but they lack clear direction after the first year. Once students declare majors and begin the junior year, they enter programs with more structure and guidance, and motivation issues from the second year decrease. To address the second-year issues, we offer the following recommendations.

High-Impact Practices to Promote Engagement

Small liberal arts colleges can help address sophomore slump by providing opportunities for focused exploration in the second year to help close the gap between exploration and commitment. The high-impact educational practices mentioned above are often delivered by departments and programs to declared majors; but our project demonstrates that these practices offer sophomores opportunities to develop meaningful relationships in an academic context. Our research shows that sophomores are prepared to be involved in opportunities that tie classroom learning to experiences outside the classroom, including research, service-learning, community-

based learning, and internships. The high-impact practices also allow students to reflect on postbaccalaureate opportunities, including graduate school and merit scholarship competitions. Sophomore gatherings and seminars also promote intellectual and social communities. Sophomores benefit from experiences that offer opportunities to reflect on intercultural relations and their identity in relation to others. Sophomore narratives reinforced the impression that relationships matter at small schools and that students expect to find a balance between academic and social aspects of the college experience.

Implications for Advising

Molly Schaller, one of the project consultants, offered her views on institutional changes that can make a difference for sophomores. Her major recommendation is that colleges should design environments and programs to guide sophomores in ongoing, structured exploration of the world, themselves, majors, and careers. The structured and focused exploration must go beyond the open-ended exploration typically seen in the first-year. She recommends, for instance, that faculty advisors encourage sophomores to carry out service-learning projects, internships, job shadowing, and undergraduate research—activities typically reserved for juniors and seniors. Schools can also consider using tools for self-reflection and assessment (e.g., TypeFocus™, MBTI, Holland Self-Directed Search™, StrengthsQuest™). She also recommended a resource developed by Career Services at University of Tennessee: “What Can I do with a Major in...?” (see Colorado College’s sophomore web page for a link to this resource <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/academics/sophomore/majors/default.html>). Faculty advisors can apply a learning-centered approach by asking guided questions and letting advisees figure out the answers and find their own voice. Students should be encouraged to design individualized plans for ongoing exploration and decision-making and should be given the responsibility for learning, while at the same time faculty advisors have the duty to support the students through the challenges.

Through our collaborative conversations, we have identified a number of guidelines that can promote sophomore engagement with liberal learning at small liberal arts colleges with faculty-based advising programs.

- **First-year students are “rising sophomores.”** In the second semester of the first year of college, students begin reflecting on the meaning of the college experience and what they plan to do for the second year. In some cases, students leave an institution after the first year because they do not see that the second year will be more meaningful and challenging than the first year. Advisors should encourage a focused exploration during the first-year student’s second semester and help rising sophomores identify opportunities to engage in high-impact educational practices.
- **Second-year challenges require second-year support.** Institutions often assume that sophomores have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the second year of college with more independence. Yet, our research suggests that the second year poses more challenges as students question the meaning of a liberal arts education and the direction they will take. This situation occurs at the same time that the institution provides less support, structure, and guidance for the students.

- **Class identity strengthens peer networks and promotes engagement.** Institutions can promote sophomore class identity by holding sophomore gatherings, including sophomore welcome celebrations at the beginning of the academic year, and distributing class items such as insulated cups, water bottles, pens, planners, and clothing. Gatherings help students identify common second-year issues, and sophomore dinners and information fairs help students extend their peer networks and broaden the reflective conversations that promote engagement.
- **Probing the meaning of all-college requirements can help students focus on their own goals.** Faculty advisors applying the learning-centered approach can encourage students to think about what the all-college requirements or general education requirements truly mean. Rather than viewing them as a checklist of requirements, students should be challenged to relate the requirements to the institution’s mission as well as their personal goals and interests.
- **Sophomores need help identifying mentors and advisors.** Our research indicates that sophomores often lack information about faculty and staff who share their academic interests and who may be available as academic mentors. Faculty advisors for first-year students can help advisees begin connecting with faculty and programs in the student’s areas of interest—regardless of whether the student intends to major in that area.
- **Events designed for majors should also seek out prospective majors.** Departments and programs often organize events for declared majors, but it can be a challenge to identify prospective majors who would also benefit from the events. Schools can encourage departments and programs to find ways for sending specific invitations to sophomores—through class email lists or the sophomore class council, or by having students announce their interest in a major. Advising offices can provide funds to support sophomore group gatherings for potential majors.
- **Students benefit from guided exploration.** Advisors can encourage students to engage in focused exploration in the second year. This sort of intentional advising requires reflective conversations that challenge sophomores to identify their goals, their learning style, their strengths, and their interests.
- **Advisors at each level help launch students to the next step.** The first-year advisor plays a key role in helping launch the student to the next steps in the educational process. This may involve recommending a new advisor for the student in the second year, and it will involve changing advisors as the student declares a major. The advisor can play a crucial role in modeling how students go through the process of developing contacts with faculty and staff. Our research confirms that students rely heavily on the guidance of a faculty advisor, and an advisor’s recommendations on how to make the most out of college can have a big impact on sophomore experiences.
- **Faculty development is vital to successful sophomore programming.** When our institutions created successful first-year experience programs, support for faculty

development was crucial for developing seminars and enhancing advising and mentoring. Our project indicates that successful sophomore-experience programming requires faculty support for launching new seminars and using new advising approaches. Support also helps faculty identify ways to include sophomores in research, service-learning, intercultural dialogues, and other high-impact activities. To help students move beyond the first-year exploration phase, faculty development and support will enable them to enhance their advising relationships with sophomores.

Conclusion

Colleagues from the four schools benefited from the collaboration that took place over the last three and-a-half years. We learned from each other, and our institutions changed as a result of this collaboration. Most importantly, we believe our students' educational experiences have been enhanced. With greater attention to sophomore-year concerns, building on the critically important student-advisor relationship, we believe other institutions can likewise seize the traditional "sophomore slump" as an opportunity to bridge first-year programming and focused activity in the major. By providing a year of guided exploration and reflection, colleges will strengthen student academic engagement that will ultimately improve student success beyond the sophomore year.

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