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Project Transition: A Program for Underachieving College-Bound High School Seniors.

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A program involving instruction in library skills, reading skills, and study skills is described. High school graduates, rated as underachievers, took a 3-week skills instruction course, followed by regular summer session college work, as a means of preparing themselves for college. Counseling was provided in individual and group sessions. When scores on standardized tests taken at the beginning and used to predict grade point average (GPA) were compared with actual GPA at the end of the summer session, it was found that in most cases the actual GPA was higher than had been predicted. It was concluded that underachieving high school students who want to enter college can be helped through such skills courses to prepare themselves for college-level work. References are included. (MD)

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PROJECT TRANSITION: A PROGRAM FOR UNDERACHIEVING COLLEGE-BOUND HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

SESSION: Skills Needed by the College-Bound Student
Friday, May 2, 1969
2:15-3:15 p.m.

Many young people who graduate from high school each year lack the basic skills necessary for entrance into college. For a number of these, the problem is not lack of intellectual ability, but a combination of several other factors. Among these are inadequate personal counseling, limited educational opportunities, a lack of understanding of the tasks that confront them in college, poor self-concept, and "a background in a culture which accords academic achievement a low priority" (11). This is not intended to cast undue adverse reflection on the schools from which these students come, but rather to recognize that under present conditions of overcrowded classrooms and understaffed faculties, many youths pass through the schools without receiving the individual help they need. Meeth (6) states that "The growing need for and the number of pre-college preparatory programs throughout the country points a finger

directly at the possible inability of the public school system in America to overcome the social and educational problems of the disadvantaged youth of their own community, placing an unnecessary burden upon the college. Recent trends toward higher and higher admissions criteria have caused institutions to develop pre-college preparatory programs on the college campus as a device for maintaining standards and at the same time recruiting larger numbers of students from the ranks of the disadvantaged. This maneuver has tended to be effective in avoiding difficulty with accrediting associations as well as maintaining academic standards sufficiently high to enable graduates to enter graduate study with relative ease."

Perhaps at this point it would be well to clarify the term underachiever. Meeth (7) states that to call students who could do more than they have done underachievers is to oversimplify the term, since this description would fit almost anyone. Students must be considered relative to one another or to a system of testing to determine whether or not they are living up to their potential. Even standardized tests are not adequate for all purposes. At Harvard, students with scores 500 points below the admissions level performed about as well as those regularly admitted (3). In Project Transition, students were considered underachievers if they failed to perform at a level indicated by either their I.Q. and/or by standardized test scores.

Before the program began, the following group tests and inventories were administered: the American College Test, Edwards Personality Preference Schedule, Missouri College English Placement Test, Nelson-Denny Reading Test, and the Strong Interest Inventory. In addition to these group measures, the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale was administered

individually. Information from the tests and inventories served as the basis for individual counseling, tutoring and course placement.

During the testing period, students also attended a series of college life orientation programs. Films were shown on reading skills, the importance of developing good study habits, use of the library, and group dynamics. These films introduced topics to be explored later in the skills course. To bring the student face to face with the demands made by the college, an admissions counselor instructed them in such necessary matters as how to plan their curriculum, how to figure a grade point average, when to drop a course instead of fighting it, and the importance of transcripts. A superior student talked about his own study habits and classroom practices which had helped him to succeed. Most of one session was devoted to discussing reasons for participation in Project Transition. Among the reasons cited were the following: to adjust to college life; to increase knowledge; to be able to attend college in order to work or to help others; to avoid the draft; to get away from mother; parental desire; and to develop self-esteem. When students were asked to discuss the main problems they had experienced in high school work, they mentioned these: poor high school education; laziness; poor study habits; inability to concentrate on or retain material; uncertainty as to why they should learn; and lack of self-confidence.

Underlying the approach to the three week skills course was the assumption that: (1) The language functions of reading, writing, speaking, and listening are the really crucial areas when considering the skills required for success in college. (2) The basic language functions are interrelated to the extent that a change in one tends to effect a change in the others. (3) The development of language functions is impeded

by a low rate of fluency in any one or a combination of the functions (10). Therefore, it was decided to place a heavy concentration on these language skills preceding the regular college course work.

All of the students in Project Transition participated in the three-week skills course. This course consisted of one hour of group instruction each day in various study skills, vocabulary development, and other reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. During the hour, skills were introduced, discussed and practiced briefly. After a short break, the students went into small laboratory sessions and worked on the various skills which had been introduced in the previous hour. There were ten students in each lab. The materials used were Pauk (8), Braam and Braam (2), Lewis (5), Altick (1) and Hill (4).

In the labs the students worked on their own. The instructor gave assistance where needed and encouraged application of the skills to real college situations. The lab sessions were three hours in length with a break at the half-way point. The labs were flexible, which permitted each group to approach the task in a way which appeared to offer the best results for them. There were brief check-up tests every day or two and a final test at the end of the third week.

At the end of the three-week study skills course, the students were placed in two regular college courses selected from English, Sociology, and Speech. This placement was made on the basis of test scores from the standardized tests administered before the program began and on performance in the three-week skills session.

Weekly seminars were held in the afternoon during the last six weeks of the summer. At each of these meetings one of the division

heads explained his division and how it related to other divisions in the college. He then answered questions relative to the division, e.g., major or minor requirements, employment opportunities, etc.

The students met for two hours each evening with a regular faculty member for help with course work and discussions aimed at changing attitudes and self-images. There were six faculty members who served in this way, making it possible to have a one to five faculty-student ratio. These meetings were informal and students were permitted to go from one group to another if they felt that what was going on in the one was more applicable to them than what was in the other.

Counseling sessions were set up on four days of each week. These were both individual and group sessions. In the first two sessions the student was informed of his performance on the tests and inventories which he had taken. He was given an honest appraisal of his potential in relation to his stated interests. In the following individual sessions he was kept informed as to how his performance was related to expectations. In the group sessions various aspects of college life were discussed along with any personal or group problems which the participants cared to reveal. These sessions were conducted by the director of the project and a clinical psychologist.

The results of the project were encouraging. When the average grade point average attained by the participants was compared with the predicted grade point average based on self-reported high school grades and ACT scores, the participants' grade point average exceeded the predicted grade point at a better than chance level. The group as a whole, with a predicted GPA of 1.5, achieved a GPA of 2.2 in the summer and 2.0 in the

fall (GPA is based on a three point scale).

During the summer ten of the students were able to achieve much higher grades than would have been expected. The predicted GPA for these ten students was 1.8, while the achieved GPA was 2.7. By the end of the fall semester only four of the students were able to attain a GPA significantly higher than their predicted GPA. For these four students the predicted GPA was 1.7 and the achieved GPA was 2.8.

While averages are interesting, they do not reveal the entire picture. It seems much more sensible and important to look at individuals. Time will not permit a look at each participant; therefore one representative of those who succeeded and one representative of those who made the poorest showing were selected as examples.

Joe M. had not anticipated going beyond high school. Upon graduation he found employment in a dry goods store and soon found the low status and long hours depressing. He also felt a need to make a greater contribution in life, perhaps as a teacher in secondary education. Given his late blooming interest in a college education, he felt that Project Transition represented his only chance to succeed. He applied himself to his work more seriously than most of the students. The members of his laboratory group were amazed to find that he was only nineteen: they had guessed his age as twenty-five.

Several times during the summer Joe became quite depressed over his imagined lack of progress and at one point seriously considered dropping out. When his chance to make an "A" in one course was pointed out and he was told of his status among the instructors, he decided to stick it out. He had the highest average among the Project Transition students and

seemed determined to continue above average work throughout the remainder of his college career. His predicted GPA was 2.0, his actual summer GPA was 3.6, and his fall GPA was 3.0. He took the program seriously, surprised himself with his success, and assumed an attitude of anticipated success, rather than anticipated failure.

In contrast was the case of Paul L. From the time Paul was in junior high school he had a large responsibility outside of school. His father had died, leaving him many responsibilities on the farm which had to be taken care of before and after school. He felt his teachers did not understand him or care about him. He came into the program at the insistence of his mother rather than a deep felt need within himself. He developed an attitude early in the program similar to the one he had had in high school. On several occasions he sought out the director of the program and indicated that he felt no one was concerned about him and that the instructors graded him down not because his work was inferior but because they disagreed with him on his point of view. After each of these lengthy sessions he would vow to do better and to "show" the instructor that he was capable. However, this vow was short lived -- his instructor would report the next day that he had slept during the entire class period. Paul completed the summer's work with a GPA of 0.1 for 7 hours of work and needless to say did not return in the fall.

Both Joe M. and Paul L. had average I.Q.'s. The major difference between them seems to be in their perception of the program and the change or lack thereof in their self-image.

These findings corroborate those of Pitcher (11) who has said that "if it is true that nothing succeeds like success, is it also a fact that

nothing fails like failure?" Pitcher goes on to say that "The disaster of the young people who fail in academic tasks is that frequently the failure reinforces negatively the entire way they perceive themselves and their world. Consequently, they take this damaged view of themselves along everywhere."

In each case in Project Transition where the student did average or better academic work there was a dramatic change in self-image. The data indicated that the most important factor or skill needed by an underachieving college-bound senior is a change in attitude toward self and the academic world. The participants who were able to develop a perception of themselves as successful college students were succeeding. Those who showed little or no change in their perception were in academic difficulty. These findings are in agreement with those of several other colleges where similar programs were conducted. Pervin, Reik and Dalrymple (9) state that the underachieving student is locked in "an achievement oriented meritocracy which places heavy emphasis on academic excellence measured by grades, skill in taking examinations and finding solutions to problems set by others." The personality of the achievement oriented person bears little resemblance to that of either the creative person, or the underachiever. Persisters are more academically and intellectually oriented, have more reasons and a wider variety of reasons for college choices, and do a greater amount of studying. Meeth (7) states that "It is evident that one of the strongest differences between persisters and withdrawals is that the withdrawals do not fit the academic mold and the persisters do. The motivational factors which allow the persisters to complete an undergraduate education have a great deal to do with understanding and

persisting in the system of American higher education."

It would appear that students who are similar in background to those who participated in this program can succeed in college if they are willing to accept the responsibility for motivation, discipline, and study. Skills are not enough. Programs aimed at salvaging the underachiever must be structured in such a way as to encourage and provide an opportunity for the students to help themselves. Admission to this program was based on a sincere desire to study in order to meet college entrance requirements. The program placed the responsibility for study on the student. The supervision by the faculty and the periodic evaluation of progress was conducted in such a way as to challenge the students to discipline themselves to meet assignments. Obviously, this type of program will not help all students with all of their problems, nor will it guarantee that a student will not fail at some future date. However, this program and similar ones at other institutions are helping many young students to improve their academic performance, making it possible for them to enter regular college courses and continue their education. "One of the big questions facing institutions helping underachievers seems to be whether or not these students should be accorded special attention or treated in the same manner as all other students" (7). Either approach has problems and both students and institutions are split on the issue or take both positions simultaneously. While there is danger in either approach, the results of this project seem to indicate that these students not only should receive special attention but that they must receive it if they are to succeed in the academic world.

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