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College Transition Success: Views from the Front Line

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Abstract

The PreK-12 and higher education systems operate as separate and distinct entities (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). States organize them as separate units and the administrators in the systems are formally trained separately and operate separately with few exceptions. While studies have been conducted from the PreK-12 and higher education perspectives in terms of how to bridge this gap for students, little has been done to gather the ideas of those directly involved in bridge programs such as the TRIO programs that exist in the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act.

This study searched for insights into systemic issues due to the two separate systems from the perspective of those "on the front line" of bridge programs rather than from individuals in positions of authority. Bridge programs, as understood here, are those programs specifically intended to help students transition from the PreK-12 environment to the higher education environment. Using a convenience sample, the study has focused on those working within a TRIO program.

Participants selected for this mixed methods study include "front-line" individuals who are employed to work directly with students to facilitate the transition. These include people who have titles such as advisors or counselors, who are affiliated with TRIO, and who identify as working directly with students more than 50% of their time. The over-arching intent was to examine what insights these individuals, working directly with students, might have regarding potential barriers and facilitative processes.

Keywords

college retention, higher education, student success, student transition, systems thinking, TRIO

Introduction

This research study explored the perceived systems challenges, as identified by front-line professionals, that certain students experience as they transition from a pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade (PreK-12) setting to higher education (HE). It was anticipated that, by surveying and interviewing individuals who worked directly with students preparing to transition or in the transition process, new insights might be discovered that would help students in that process.

Prekindergarten (PreK) is a class or program preceding kindergarten for children usually from three to four years old (Merriam-Webster, 2022). PreK-12 is used here to refer primarily to the middle and upper levels of the pre-kindergarten through high school system as this is where most bridge programs occur. Due to the variety of these programs, there will be references that use K-12, for kindergarten, rather than PreK. The term "bridge programs" is used broadly to describe those programs intended to facilitate student movement from PreK-12 into HE, and these may be housed in PreK-12 or HE. This study focused on front-line professionals working with TRIO programs as these programs exist within both systems. TRIO programs work with students potentially "at risk:"

> The Federal TRIO Programs (TRIO) are Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first-generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs. (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2022, p. 1)

Use of the phrase "student success" will be understood here as defined by the survey participants and is generically meant to include transition from PreK-12 to HE and completion of the first year of college. The primary focus is on the perception by those front-line professionals of institutional or systemic areas for improvement and for continued support. "Front-line" is used here to refer to those who spend more than 50% of their work time directly with students and not on administrative tasks. TRIO programs include the Upward Bound, Veterans Upward Bound, Ronald E. McNair Scholars Program, Educational Opportunity Centers, Student Support Services, Talent Search, and Gear Up programs.

The PreK-12 and HE systems operate independently of each other, and the authors suggest that the independence contributes to the difficulties students have in progressing and retaining from PreK-12 to HE. The Collaborative Imperative (2014), a report from the Hart Research Association and edBridge Partners, found an interest for greater collaboration amongst both PreK-12 and HE administrators, but also found limited connection between the two systems. From another perspective, the report-out of a Learning Connection conference, *Gathering Momentum: Building the Learning Connection Between Schools and Colleges,* Michael Kirst and Andrea Venezia

(2004) argue that, "The lack of coordination between the public K–16 and postsecondary sectors impedes successful transitions between the systems and diminishes educational opportunity for many students" (p. 2).

There has been a large amount of research on issues of retention and graduation rate (Astin, 1984) and the various programs intended to improve these. Surveys related to such studies often land in the hands of administrators, so the focus here has been on front-line professionals to gather their views of systemic issues. An article in Education Weekly (Ake-Little, 2018), provides a significant commentary and description on the existing state of affairs:

> While the AP program has helped to bridge the gap between K-12 and higher education, both institutions remain largely unaware of how the other operates. PreK-12 school administrators are eager to make their students "college ready," while college administrators, thirsting for increased enrollment, are courting K-12 students early in their secondary school careers. But the desire to be more integrated masks a troubling reality. In 2016, 70 percent of high school graduates immediately enrolled in higher education. As of the previous year, however, the six-year rate of completion for full-time undergraduate students at four-year institutions was only 59 percent. Researchers have long bemoaned the socioeconomic factors that may influence this gap, but less discussed is how the siloed nature of both sectors prevents the exchange of practices that could help all students achieve success. (p. 1)

The concern for student success and for successful transition is national in scope and is echoed in multiple reports. The following is an excerpt from a Chronicle of Higher Education report (2019, p. 63), *The Looming Enrollment Crisis: How Colleges are Responding to Shifting Demographics and New Student Needs*, and is particularly relevant to the bridge concept:

> David Kirp's 2019 book, *The College Dropout Scandal*, makes an impassioned argument for serious improvements in low retention rates. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center estimates that only 62 percent of students entering college in 2017 returned to the same institution the following fall. One in four didn't re-enroll anywhere only 12 months after beginning college. Glenn Davis and fellow researchers at St. Cloud State University, in Minnesota, figure that improvements in retention begin with identifying at-risk students. They have developed a brief survey that detects first-year students who are at risk for attrition because of a low sense of belonging despite strong grades. At Rutgers University, some student-work supervisors are being trained to use their professional relationships with student employees to connect them more securely with the campus. While student success is always of the highest value, shrinking pools of prospective students make

> retention improvements important to institutional sustainability (Kirp, 2019, p. 25).

The PreK-12 and HE systems may share the same mission of helping to educate youth for productive adulthood, but they are generally organized and function as separate systems. Krislov and Volk (2014) clearly describe the shared goal: "Our mission also includes training graduates for their future as mature and reasoning citizens, able to understand their lives, work, and interests, as well as the needs of their communities, their nation, and the larger world." That shared goal, however, does not impact the operation of the systems as evidenced in the reports previously referenced. Little effort has been made to systematically coordinate efforts across educational levels, nor within leadership development programs for professional educators.

That students can achieve their learning and life goals is a fundamental objective of the educational systems critical to the growth and development of every state. This research was intended to help understand some of the systemic issues in student transition from PreK-12 to HE and was guided by the following four research questions:

1. What systemic blockages do front-line bridge professionals identify as hindering the transition of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?

2. What processes do front-line bridge professionals identify as facilitating the transition of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?

3. What leadership ideas would front-line bridge professionals offer to improve the transition of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?

4. What ideas do front-line bridge professionals suggest that might help to improve the connection between the two systems?

Methodology

A mixed methods methodology approach was followed in this study, initiated with a brief survey intended to gain both qualitative and quantitative information, and followed with in-depth interviews with consenting participants. The sample was purposive and represented those directly involved with students as part of the transition process between PreK-12 and HE.

Participant Information

It was determined that using TRIO professionals allowed the most direct and consistent way to identify individuals filling these roles. The participants for this study were included based on the following criteria:

1. Currently employed in a TRIO program working directly with students.
2. Work in the State of Oklahoma.

Participants were identified by online searches of TRIO programs within Oklahoma, and they were recruited by targeted email obtained on public sites. All university procedures were followed, and emails and surveys were previously approved by the IRB. All participants were provided with an online consent form within the Qualtrics survey, and no records were kept that could identify individuals. The Qualtrics survey was administered online and consisted of a limited number of questions pertaining to the perceived strengths of existing programs and potential opportunities for improvement as seen in Appendix A. The survey was estimated to take approximately ten minutes to complete.

The Qualtrics system has basic analytical tools that were used to summarize quantitative data in aggregate format. The qualitative survey questions as well as the interviews were examined using a Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 2006) approach. Participants in the initial survey were asked if they were willing to participate in a phone interview. Those who identified themselves as willing to participate were contacted by email, appointments were made, and semi-structured interviews conducted (Appendix B). The interview questions followed two pathways, one for those involved with pre-collegiate programs and the other for collegiate programs. The questions were essentially the same but worded according to participant role working with pre-collegiate or collegiate students. While the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, participants were not identifiable on the recordings. All survey data was stored on a personal computer secured by password protection. Only the principal investigator and co-principal investigator had access to the data and password.

Survey Process

Surveys can be used to collect data about characteristics, experiences, and opinions in relation to participants (Gall et al., 1996). A survey process was determined to be the best initial data gathering process with a follow-up interview from those consenting. Questions for the survey were developed by the research team and were tested for validity with frontline professionals in the TRIO programs as well as with students in two educational leadership classes. The survey addressed the major themes of the research questions.

Similarly, the interview questions were developed with the participation of the whole research team and with the intention of taking between ten to fifteen minutes to complete. A semi-structured approach was determined to fit the goals of the research project in order to allow participants to elaborate in areas related to the research questions.

The survey system, Qualtrics, provided simple analysis of the data for each of the quantitative questions. Interpretation of the qualitative questions was done independently by two of the researchers, then convergent themes were discussed, and differing perspectives were considered. This form of inter-rater reliability approximates the claim of Rossman (1999), “Reading, reading, and reading once more through the data forces the researcher to become familiar with those data in intimate ways” (p. 153).

Findings

The survey process began as 748 surveys were emailed and 114 came back as undeliverable. Six hundred and thirty-four surveys were successfully emailed and of those, 142 completed responses were received for a return rate of 22.4%. The majority of responses occurred within the first week after dissemination, though there were additional responses after a reminder was emailed at the end of two weeks.

Job titles varied from institution to institution, which was a challenge in the initial identification of appropriate participants. The decision was made to err on the side of inclusion in determining who would receive the initial email, knowing that some respondents would eliminate themselves from the study as they responded to the question regarding their role as frontline professionals (Question number 1, Appendix A).

The return rate from the initial survey was approximately what had been anticipated given the challenge of job title variance and the potential of individuals shifting jobs. What was unexpected and exciting was the large percentage of respondents willing to participate in the interview process: 62%, or 27 individuals. This presented a challenge in terms of the time allotted to conduct interviews, but it was considered a welcome challenge.

Table 1

Return Rate of Respondents

	Number of Responses	Percentage
Individuals e-mailed	226	100.0%
Individuals responding to survey	53	23.5%
Surveys Completed	42	18.6%
Willing to Participate in Interview	27	62%

Survey Results

Participants were asked to rank skills, knowledge, or attitudes that were most important to them in their work with students. Authors analyzed the results and found several trends. The results were initiated by the authors and showed a strong appreciation for interpersonal factors. Relationship skills were ranked first followed by communications skills.

Table 2

Ranking of Skills, Knowledge, Attitudes, Question 4

Leadership SKA	Ranking	Percentage Ranking First or Second
Relationship Skills	1	67%
Effective Communication	2	59%
Knowledge of Higher Education System	3	12%
Collaboration	4	10%
Computer Skills	5	5%
Technical Writing	6	0%
Financial Funding Process Options	7	5%
Empathy	8	43%

Survey of Valuable Services. In response to the Qualtrics question regarding services provision, three major categories emerged as most significant: technical, personal, and academic. Technical service included what one respondent referred to as "helping students to learn the college lingo." Other technical support referred to helping students with financial aid, selecting classes, enrollment, and similar issues. The majority of responses, over 50% of all responses, referenced technical concerns.

Improving Student Transition and Success. When asked for ideas regarding ways to improve student transition, the responses tended to reflect a "more of the same" mindset. More financial support, more interpersonal support, more technical assistance, better pre-collegiate preparation, and greater clarity in the costs involved and the meaning of a student loan to students. Better communication with parents and connections between high school and college are other suggestions. There was a sense that the proper efforts were in place, and that increasing these efforts would resolve the issue of transition.

Individual Interview Findings

The individual interviews (See Appendix B) came from 18 of the 27 individuals who agreed to participate in the interview process. Two attempts were made to contact each of those who indicated a willingness to participate. The nine who were not interviewed were unreachable within the given timeline for the interviews. All the interviews were under 15 minutes, resulting in forty pages of transcripts. Coding of the transcripts resulted in five themes. The themes and specific elements included within each theme are in Table 3. There were wording differences between the interview questions for those who identified as pre-collegiate professionals and those who identified as collegiate. Differences were contextual only and not of substance.

Table 3

Themes & Specific Elements

Theme	Includes
Preparation	• Academic Factors (tutoring, test scores, GPA) • Early College Exposure/Concurrent Courses
Environmental	• Family Factors/Cultural Factors • Poverty/Wealth • Access to Technology
Knowledge	• Understanding of higher ed lingo • Admissions, advisement, financial aid, etc.
Personal	• Future Aspirations/Career Goals • Social/Emotional/Mental Health Factors • Motivation
Resources	• Mentoring programs • TRIO programs • University and high school support resources

It should be noted that none of these themes are totally exclusive, and the themes might be better represented in some type of a mind map, but the chart allows for some ready visualization. Academic preparation is an observation that is commonly mentioned in public conversations and referenced in scholarly literature (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). As TRIO programs are targeted at those students considered at risk, the reality of preparation shortfalls is not surprising, and the lack of exposure to the world of higher education is common. Often, TRIO participants are the first in their family to attend higher education (Washington, 2021).

Factors related to the environment (family, cultural, socio-economical) pose a different type of challenge for the student. It is often assumed on campuses, for instance, that all students have adequate technology or at least have access to it. This assumption was challenged very quickly during the pandemic as many institutions found themselves needing to provide additional technological support ranging from internet boosters to computers. Cultural and family traditions or values are also at play. One respondent identified these environmental factors to be the most significant of all: "I think for a lot of students they come from families where education is maybe not a priority**…** So, when those students do choose to go ahead and enter a university, the support that they have and the understanding that their support system may have of the higher education process is minimal to non-existent." This represents a cultural difference in terms of priorities and exposure to higher education, and not a lack of caring.

Knowledge of Higher Education Systems and Expectations. This is a familiar theme in higher education, health care, home purchasing, and almost any consumer process. We do not know or understand systems that are new to us or those that we have not used frequently. The processes and the language used are different, and in this particular scenario they are different than what students have experienced in PreK-12. This may be exasperated in cases where students are first generation.

One respondent put it succinctly, "It's just a different world I think, making that transition from high school to college and trying to understand all the systems in place in college and how to navigate those systems." Multiple challenges exist as students face entry into this different world. And if this does parallel other experiences, it will help us help students to consider what we can learn from those environments.

Internal Personal Characteristics. For many students, they are leaving the family nest for the first time, even though they may not be moving into a traditional college environment. College is often the transition point between adolescence and adulthood. It is the liminal space, the transformative black box. Unlike the moment when mom or dad says, "you're an adult now," it does not happen in an instant. Finding personal motivation, answering questions about careers, even paying bills for the first time, these may all be surprises to the new college student.

Whether or not this represents a generational issue, Gen Z or Millennials, does not resolve the reality. While respondents referenced this theme the least, it is a reality in all cases. Each individual brings with them their life experience and visions of the future.

Resources and Support Systems. Both PreK-12 and higher education have systems in place to support students in the transitional process, the TRIO program being a prime example of the

support system. The variance in terms of the level of assistance provided is as broad as the quality and financial support of educational systems so that some students receive very little, and others have family as well as institutional support systems. “But you have one counselor for one whole grade, she has 500 students. How are they going to reach those students who don’t even know what questions to ask?”

The scarcity of resources, as identified by interviewees, was the second most common response relating to systemic challenges. This is consistent with comments from professional associations across the US that suggest that most institutions are not providing adequate support as represented in ratios of professionals to students (Association of University and College Counseling Center Director Survey, 2013; National Association of Colleges and Employers; International Accreditation of Counseling Services).

Identified Processes. The most significant factors identified were the resources and support systems. These were perceived as twice as significant as the academic preparation and the familiarity with the higher education system. Specifically, a respondent identified programs and activities that she was often involved with herself: “We actually have a mentor program, and we try to get as many participants as we can that are freshman or sophomore students to sign up for that program. That kind of helps them have a peer point of contact whenever they just have, you know, basic questions or needing to think about a class. You know, it’s just having a level of a support system.” Similarly, some respondents try to introduce students to the world of higher education and how it works and is reflected in this interviewee’s comment: “We’re trying to really help them set the foundation for the kinds of habits that they will need and then also understanding the processes and the systems, such as financial aid and enrollment, that are going to keep them in school semester to semester….”

The interview responses offered were very concrete and very programmatic in nature. None of the responses identified facilitative factors that were systemic in nature other than referencing programs that exist at a higher level such as mentoring, TRIO programs, and university and high school support systems. The most frequently mentioned factor across all themes was financial support.

Useful Services

Resources and academic exposure were the two most dominant responses when respondents were asked about their most useful service. These professionals also recognized that their knowledge of the higher education system was also of significant value. These responses are similar to those found in the Qualtrics survey where technical support, personal support, and academic support were identified as significant services. At the other end of what might be viewed as a continuum, respondents said that did not have an impact on the students’ personal characteristics nor on their environment.

“Probably emotional support skills, like not just being for them and listening to them, but also kind of teaching them about handling their emotions and things like that,” one respondent explained. This idea of emotional support did resonate through all of the interview responses, though there seemed to be a recognition that their support was limited, and they obviously could not control the

environment away from school. A respondent stated the dilemma well saying, "Back home, the conversation was, now, how do I explain to my family that I'm at home but I'm still doing my research and still pursuing my education? So really, that voice of reason to help the student kind of figure out how to navigate that experience." The professional is remote from the students' home environment, but recognizes, as does the student, that there are times when that environment is unintentionally disruptive. The professionals, therefore, put their focus on what they can impact: the various types of support and services on the campus.

Leadership and Administration Action. None of the respondents suggested that administrators might intervene at the level of the student personal characteristics. This might be noteworthy to those who would suggest that admissions or selection criteria should change or to those who suggest that not everyone should go to college.

Responses focused on hands-on approaches, such as creating more opportunities for high school students while in high schools to be exposed to college and more support when they arrive. One impassioned and clear statement from the interview was, "There's just not enough manpower per student in the high school. To me, we just need more boots on the ground, and I don't care who's wearing the boots, just so long as they care about kids."

Similar comments from the interview used the phrases "hands-on" and "give them real world facts about costs and long-term career goals." There was a strong sense that the connections with students must be direct and realistic about cost, financial aid, enrollment, and career prospects, something that participants indicated they thought administrators and leaders could attend to. Specific references were made to institutional honesty regarding enrollment processes, financial aid and long-term debt issues, and to job and career potential for different academic programs.

Discussion

The rationale for seeking ideas from front-line professionals was that they would see things differently and perhaps produce ideas that were unique and out of the box. What seemed to emerge was that they see things through their vantage point and offered ideas that might have been anticipated. No silver bullet was found in the participant responses to the survey nor in the interviews.

The starting point for action may be the simple recognition that there is a gap between the two systems and that it does have an impact on students. What can be done to address the gap, to close the gap rather than just to bridge it? The gap is supported by systems created by well-intentioned educators, and it is those same educators who may be able to close the gap on student success.

The recognition that the gap exists and that it is a source of the challenge inherent in transitioning is a starting point. One comment from an interviewee captures this sentiment, "…and so, there is a need for the administration in the PreK through 12 sector to be able to create those environments where the parent can be educated on the collegiate experience and the stuff that it's going to take to ensure that their son or daughter is successful…" Regardless of the focus, recognizing that there is a problem is the starting point.

There were specific ideas proposed by interviewees. Many suggestions revolved around ideas of more support, both in PreK-12 and HE. The ideas reference support in terms of advising, familiarizing family and students with HE, and technical support as students navigate systems and adjust to differences in expectations between HE and PreK-12.

One specific idea that deviated from the rest was to make concurrent courses more available to all students. These classes are usually exclusive to the high performing students, those who are most likely to be successful and those who have had access to and success with standardized testing. A more inclusive approach to concurrent courses would provide a more in-depth experience than the college visit and could be conducted via a virtual format if that was beneficial. A combination of both concurrent classes along with the actual college campus visit could be a supportive way to promote familiarity with the selected college.

While this study provided few new perspectives, there are several ideas that may help to enrich the training process for front-line professionals. Training professionals in the concept of meta- analysis might broaden their perspective and help to reveal systemic problems. Understanding action research could result in professionals asking more in-depth questions before, during, and after the transition process. This does not suggest a lack in these individuals' training, but merely suggests a way to get deeper into an understanding of possibilities to lessen the gap.

The search for the silver bullet for transition will likely continue, and rightfully so. As educators, we share in the responsibility of providing whatever assistance we can to help students make the transition. It may be an endless search, but there is value in that process that should be addressed.

Conclusion

The transition from PreK-12 to HE is a transformative time. It is a part of the movement from adolescence to adulthood for many. That transformation is more challenging for some students than for others, but in the majority of cases there is an opportunity for educational systems to assist in the transformation. The suggestion here is that there are possibilities to change the systems themselves in ways that can help students succeed. It is a challenge to us as educators as we search for the key to successful transition and transformation in conjunction with working to help change the systemic problems in this area.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Perspectives of Front-Line Professionals of Systemic Challenges Bridging K-12 and Higher Education

1. Would you consider yourself to be in a front-line position, working 50% or more directly with students as a primary function?
   - Yes
   - No

2. Do you work with Pre-Collegiate students to prepare them for entry into higher education (meaning you work with students still in high school) or do you work with Collegiate students who are just beginning higher education?
   - Pre-Collegiate students
   - Collegiate students

3. What is the most valuable service you provide students to be successful in this process?
   - Constructed Response

4. Rank each of the following Leadership Skills, Knowledge, and Attitude that are most important to you in your job. Please arrange (tap and drag) the statements in order of importance 1-8, Rank (1) being Most Important thru Rank (8) Least Important
   - Relationship Skills
   - Effective Communication
   - Knowledge of Higher Education Counseling
   - Collaboration
   - Computer Skills, ex. Data Entry
   - Technical Writing
   - Financial-Funding Processes/Options
   - Empathy

5. What leadership skills, knowledge, and advisement are most important to you in your job?
   - Relationship Skills
   - Communication
   - Knowledge of Higher Education System
   - Collaboration

6. What one thing could be done to improve student transition and success?
   - Open-Ended Question

7. Would you be willing to participate in a 10-15 minute phone interview? If yes, please provide your email and phone number:

Appendix B

Individual Interview Questions

If precollegiate then:

1. What systemic challenges do you see hindering the transition of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?
2. What processes do you identify as facilitating the transition of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?
3. What could leadership/ administration (such as a principal) do to improve the transition and success of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?
4. Conclusion: To conclude the interview, what suggestions or ideas might you offer regarding this study? Thank you for your time.

If collegiate then:

1. What systemic challenges do you see in the transition of students during their first year in college?
2. What processes do you identify as facilitating the students' entrance into their first and second semester?
3. What could leadership/ administration do to improve the transition and success of students from PreK-12 to Higher Education?
4. Conclusion: To conclude the interview, what suggestions or ideas might you offer regarding this study? Thank you for your time.