Virtual High School Graduates:

A Study on Transitions to Postsecondary Environments and Implications for Student Affairs

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Abstract

As education systems continue to grow and evolve with new advancements in technology, so do methods of instruction. Technological advancements have helped to further distributed learning, making instruction available to students in various geographic locations and times. Virtual secondary education is a form of distributed learning where secondary students complete their high school diplomas fully online, outside of a brick-and-mortar school. Although virtual education is growing rapidly there is a lack of information regarding the experiences of these students as they transition to traditional colleges and universities after attending virtual high schools. This phenomenological study sought to describe and understand the social and academic experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional colleges and universities. The study was completed in the fall semester of 2012, with12 virtual high school graduates from South Carolina virtual high schools being interviewed. The overarching essence of the study revealed a need for more support and understanding of graduates of virtual high school students. Specifically, participants perceived a lack of understanding about their backgrounds. Professors, higher education administrators, as well as other students could benefit from learning about virtual education. Additional studies following virtual high school graduates throughout their college experiences are needed. Further, forming support networks or programs for students who graduate from virtual high schools would be beneficial for this student group.

Introduction

Education in the 21st century is changing rapidly due to advancements in technology, changing methods of communication, and learning preferences. The PEW Report stated that the Millennial Generation valued technology and believed that technology itself sets the generation apart (PEW, 2010). Millennial learners outpaced other generations in Internet and cell phone use (PEW, 2010). The quick and readily available acquisition of knowledge translates into Millennial student's preferences for education. Lowery (2004) reported that these changes require educators to update information systems and programs on a regular basis. In addition to updating systems, educators also have the opportunity to distribute knowledge across different mediums, which improves student access to an education.

Students' interest in technology that exists outside of the school day can be leveraged in a way that will facilitate collaboration and learning. Educators can benefit from training programs that prepare them to engage students in the 21st century learning environment. Dede (2011) recommended a new form of education, where learning is distributed along different formats and delivery systems. He stated, "In such a 21st century educational system, schools of education would prepare, license, and provide professional support for teachers, tutors, coaches, and mentors who were trained to orchestrate their coordinated activities through the use of a sophisticated technology infrastructure" (p. 4). Virtual secondary education is a growing method of learning. It is one way to facilitate new forms of learning, and encompassed some of Dede's (2011) recommendations. This study investigated the experiences of virtual secondary school graduates as they transition to traditional brick and mortar institutions of higher education.

Forming an understanding of the transition of virtual high school graduates to traditional colleges is crucial for student affairs professionals and educators. The transition period to college, particularly the first six weeks of college, is relevant in regards to retention (Tinto, 1988). This study describes the transition period of an emerging population, virtual high school graduates, in order to better understand the changing characteristics of college students. Social and academic issues were examined by utilizing phenomenological research methods to understand the overarching experience.

Literature Review

Virtual secondary education began in Canada in 1995, where services were extended to rural students. In the United States, the first virtual school opened in Florida in 1997 (Barbour, 2009). The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) was created through a grant from the state on a 5-year contract. Within the first five years of the FLVS opening, more than 30 states had adopted some form of online program (Barbour, 2009). The growth has continued. By 2005, there were 27 states that had state-level policies concerning virtual education, in addition to other states that operated for-profit or university virtual secondary education systems (Barbour, 2009). In 2006, there were 24 state-level virtual secondary

education systems. Michigan was the first state to mandate beginning in 2006 that all high school students must successfully complete one online course in order to graduate (Barbour, 2009). Virtual secondary schooling is a growing field of education and varies according to many complex policies and standards. This trend in education has emerged over the past decade and has continued to grow exponentially in enrollments and options (Picciano & Seaman, 2009).

Presently, students may enroll in public online secondary programs free of charge through state education programs or through public charter schools in most states (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin & Rapp, 2012). Students also have the option to take courses that are not available at their high school through virtual schools (Watson, et al., 2012). Though several studies have focused on virtual students and achievement, no studies were found that examined virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional colleges (Swicord, 2010; Lary, 2002). Predictions for virtual high school enrollment indicate that there will continue to be an increase (Watson, et. al, 2012; Picciano & Seaman, 2009).

Transition from high school to college is a difficult and emotional process (Cummings et al., 2006). Change in geographic location, change in social group, and separation from parents were only a few factors that impacted students during this transition period (Cummings, Lee & Kraut, 2006). Providing a supportive and structured atmosphere along with student programs helps with the college transition (Keup, 2007). Several theoretical models may be useful in the process of developing a strategy to understand the college transition experiences of virtual high school graduates (Schlossberg, 1982; Tinto, 1988; Astin, 1984). Social support, interaction among peers and successful intervention strategies assist in a smooth transition period from high school to college (Brown, 2009; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Osugera, 2008; Compas, Wagner, Slavin, Vannatta, 1986). Given the complicated nature of the transition process, investigation into the experiences of virtual high school graduates was warranted in order to form a full understanding of an emerging group of students. This study focused on 2012 graduates of South Carolina virtual charter high schools. Appendix A provides detailed information on the schools.

Methods

Phenomenology requires that individuals engage with their environment and make sense of it (Creswell, 1988). The individuals considered in this study, have engaged in a distinct phenomenon, and had a unique transition experience because of this phenomenon. As stipulated by Moustakas (1994), the researchers used bracketing to outline all preconceived notions and beliefs as well as kept notes throughout the interview process. Then the researchers engaged in horizontalization of the data to form themes or clusters of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants included in the study had graduated from a virtual high school in South Carolina and were currently in their first year of a traditional college. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by telephone with a variety of students

who graduated from one of the four recognized virtual high schools in South Carolina (See Appendix A) and who were in their first year of college (See Appendix B for detailed participant information). A total of 12 participants were interviewed during the fall semester of 2012. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. The participants were currently enrolled in nine different colleges or universities. Two universities were large, Southeastern research institutions. Three were small, liberal arts colleges and three students were enrolled in technical colleges hoping to transfer to public research institutions. One school was a for-profit campus of an out-of-state university. Since there was a time lapse from the first participants' interviews, at a sensitive time of transition for college students, follow-up interviews were conducted with the first eight participants in order to assess any changes or new issues. In order to ensure trustworthiness, the researchers engaged in member checks, peer debriefing and collected artifacts (Creswell, 1998).

After analyzing the transcripts and themes, one unifying finding emerged: A need for more understanding and support for graduates of virtual high schools as they transition to a traditional college. The participants mentioned in one way or another, both academically and socially, that more support and understanding was needed.

Results

Academically, students did not report many challenges, but did express some concerns regarding other's understanding of their educational backgrounds. Samuel's statement reflected the meaning of the overall essence. He stated that professors could learn more about virtual high school graduates: "I think just having an awareness of online schooling and what actually occurs with online schooling would help colleges. A lot of times the teachers of classes don't fully grasp the idea of online high school." Karima felt that the lack of understanding negatively impacted her college applications when she stated: "I think when I applied to some colleges, and say you went to online school they automatically think, they look down on it. It's nothing to look down on, it's actually a lot, it's more rigorous than public school because you are constantly having to keep up." Participants also had to explain their past to students in social situations.

Socially, participants discussed in detail the means to which they go to explain their educational backgrounds and the differences in homeschooling and virtual education. Participants did indicate that many of their peers did not understand their educational backgrounds and equated them to homeschooling. Participants hoped that others could understand their backgrounds better, because according to their viewpoints, attending virtual high schools was very different compared to homeschooling. The supporting comments related to the themes were evaluated for commonalities among each participant and for any bridging information across themes.

All participants agreed that support for the virtual high school graduates as they transition to college would be helpful. Even the participants who were transitioning easily indicated that mentors or organizations could be helpful.

Merrel stated that he was not having trouble with his transition, but that mentors and advisors would definitely help. Jielu said that having someone to talk to could help virtual high school graduates as they transition. She stated: "if they can go to a counselor or mentor, someone who understands them when they feel lonely or upset, the counselor could help the students get involved without singling them out. Being involved on campus helped me the most." Samuel went into greater detail about this topic when he explained:

> *If there could be some organization like a club of students that were in online high school so that they could connect on campus to sort of have someone to communicate with that is familiar with online so there could be a mentorship with upperclassmen who help out incoming Freshmen and Sophomores that are stull trying to get used to campus.*

Mortezza discussed a possible mentor program for virtual high school graduates. Mortezza's statement reflected a need for understanding and support, both academically and socially for students. When asked if anything could be done at technical colleges to help students from nontraditional backgrounds, she stated:

> *I was so lost, if they had a transition, I don't want to say counselor, but someone to help you emotionally and mentally cope with the big change. Also, I think it would be a good idea to have tutors to meet in person and online.*

Some of the participants were not in a situation where they needed extra support, but they indicated that it would be helpful to others. Savannah expressed these sentiments when she said:

> Definitely it would be helpful for colleges to understand that the number of virtual students is growing. So many people I talked with knew very little about my school other than its name. I had to explain how it worked and everything about it. Having advisors in the high schools and colleges who can just help with the basic transition is important.

The overarching essence, a need for more understanding and support was revealed through the analysis. Participants indicated in several ways that peers, the general public, professors and higher education administrators could form a better understanding of their backgrounds. Additionally, current students could benefit from support at colleges in the form of organizations or mentors who could aid in their transition.

Discussion

The information age has created a society where postsecondary education is a necessity for many individuals to find employment. Successful transitions throughout the educational process are especially important to assure that students transition from one milestone to another and continue to advance their education (Krueger & Rainwater, 2003; Sacks, 2007;

Pitre, 2011). Many of the participants noted that professors and peers did not have a correct understanding of their educational backgrounds. Colleges and universities need to be aware that the group of virtual high school graduates is growing, and that they may need specialized assistance as they enter college.

Virtual high school graduates may require different student service strategies in order to ensure a successful college transition period. These services could include, but are not limited to, orientation, career and/or academic counseling information sessions. Student affairs professionals need to develop these services and programs in a variety of formats, both in-person and online, to benefit students (Lowery, 2004). For example, providing specialized advising and financial aid sessions for the virtual high school graduate could be developed as both synchronous and asynchronous sessions online thus allowing for interaction with professionals but also providing ways for students to access information anytime or as often as needed. In addition, student affairs professionals need to create targeted opportunities for virtual high school graduates to meet other students and to become engaged in the college thus assisting these students in transitioning to a traditional college environment (Hornak, Akweks and Jeffs ,2010).

Student affairs professionals need to become more familiar with the virtual learning experience so they can more adequately design services and programs for virtual high school graduates. This familiarity needs to include an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods of information so that purposeful services and programs can be developed. In addition, higher education professionals need to have an understanding of the virtual high school graduate's academic and social experiences when transitioning to college so that this student population's needs are met. These services and programs have the potential to provide different outlets of information for students that are aimed at their generational upbringing and sophistication with technology as well as assisting them in their successful transition to higher education (Lowery, 2004).

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Appendix A

Virtual Secondary School Information

School	Accreditation	District	National Affiliation	2011-2012 Enrollment	2012 Graduates
Palmetto State e-cademy	National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), AdvanceED and the Northwest Accreditation Commission	South Carolina Public Charter School District	None, statewide school	368	61
Provost Academy	South Carolina Public School District	South Carolina Public Charter School District	Provost Academy, other schools in Georgia and Colorado	1,102	135
South Carolina Connections Academy	Southern Association of Colleges & Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SCAS CASI).	South Carolina Public Charter School District	Connections Academy, schools nationwide and internationally	2,794	113
South Carolina Virtual Charter School	South Carolina Public Charter School District	South Carolina Public Charter School District	K12	3,600	111

Appendix B

Participant Profiles

Participant	Name	Age	Virtual H.S.	Type of College/University	Race/Ethnic Identity	Years at H.S.	Reason for Attending High School
A	Laura	18	A	public, southeastern, research	White	3	Health problems
B	Kelly	17	C	public, southeastern, research	White	2	Work and desire to get ahead
C	JP	18	A	public, southeastern, research	Black/ African American	3	Wanted to try something new
D	Maria	18	C	private, southeastern, faith-based liberal arts	White	3	Lack of quality schools in the area
E	Jielu	18	D	public, southeastern, research	Japanese American	1	Parent stationed abroad
F	Savannah*	18	B	technical college, transferring to public liberal arts university in Fall 2013	White	4	Previously homeschooled
G	Ruth	17	C	public, southeastern, research	White	3	Bullying in middle school
H	Mortezza*	19	D	technical college transferring to public college in spring	Native American/ Persian	2	Lack of quality schools in the area, homeschooled
I	Beth	19	D	public, southeastern, liberal arts	Caucasian	3.5	Safety and desire for personalized education
J	Samuel*	18	D	technical college, transferring to public in spring	Caucasian /White	4	Previously homeschooled
K	Karima	18	D	private, faith-based, women's college	African American	2	Desire for more flexibility
L	Merrel	18	D	For-profit, campus of out-of-state university	White	2	Safety and lack of quality schools in the area