

A Cross-Case Analysis of Sophomore Students' Reflections on Self-Efficacy: Signals for Innovative Sophomore Programming

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of sophomores warrants more attention. We used self-efficacy theory to conceptualize how sophomore students described their mastery of course-related tasks, social engagement, and connection, or lack thereof, to the campus and university, and what influenced their confidence. In a qualitative cross-case analysis of data drawn from a sequential mixed-methods explanatory study on the self-efficacy of undergraduate sophomore students ($n = 20$), we found disparities between low ($n = 5$) versus high ($n = 15$) levels of self-efficacy, especially among sophomore transfer students who lived off campus. Findings indicate course-related tasks presented challenges for participants irrespective of self-efficacy scores, engagement was externally motivated, and involvement fostered connectivity and growth in self-efficacy. Implications for practice include the creation of innovative sophomore programming.

Keywords: sophomore transition, self-efficacy, connectivity, involvement, engagement

For almost 3 decades, colleges and universities allocated extensive resources to help students make successful transitions from high school to college (Barefoot, 2008; Upcraft et al., 2005). Many institutions experience challenges related to freshman persistence and direct additional retention efforts toward the first-year experience (Barefoot, 2008). These efforts include seminars, orientation or other transition programs, learning communities, and other formal student engagement opportunities. Retention scholars have posited although most student departure is after the first-year experience, an increasing amount of students stop out during their sophomore year (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Schaller, 2018; The Advisory Board Company, 2015; Tinto, 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008). Yet, there is a dearth of recent empirical research on the retention and persistence of sophomore college students.

The sophomore year experience often encompasses a compulsory major declaration and decreased levels of institutional support (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Schaller, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008). The pressure to select a major or to navigate a competitive admissions process for entry into an academic major can cause great difficulty for some and can impact students' development of self-efficacy (Hunter et al., 2010; St. John et al., 2004; Vuong et al., 2010). As a result, college sophomores at many institutions become forgotten and feel invisible (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008; Tobolowsky, 2008).

A continued lack of student engagement or involvement for students such as commuters can influence student departure. These constructs are distinct as Astin (1984) conceptualized involvement theory as a student-centered theory rather than engagement which is an institutional theory (Kuh, 2009). Astin (1984) suggested the responsibility for engagement rests with the student in which authentic involvement requires an investment of energy related to the on-campus experience.

Individual student efforts are predominant for sophomores because they receive less holistic support compared to that in their first-year experience which can lead to a lack of academic and social integration (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Moreover, these individual efforts are typically related to discrete differences in psychosocial factors experienced by sophomores which “extends beyond the inner world of self” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 562) and are influenced by interaction with the surrounding environment.

A student’s level of cognitive, intellectual, and moral development can affect academic persistence and the coping strategies employed in times of challenge or crisis. Prior research focused on students’ sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and life purpose proffers a holistic analysis for the study of college student transitions but few studies examined psychosocial factors of persistence among undergraduate sophomores specifically (Bandura, 1995, 1997; Baxter Magolda, 2009; DeWitz et al., 2009; Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Schaller, 2005; Vuong et al., 2010). This study fills a gap in recent research on college sophomores by examining second-year experiences through a qualitative mixed-methods cross-case analysis informed by Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy. The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do interview participants’ views of self-efficacy relate to their responses on the College Self-Efficacy Inventory? and (2) What environmental influences were found to influence the self-efficacy of the interview participants?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Bandura’s (1997) conceptual framework, a social cognitive theory, provides a frame for understanding environmental influences on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is malleable, and sources of efficacy beliefs include mastery experiences (most authentic source), vicarious experiences provided by social modeling, social persuasion (least influential), and physiological and emotional states, such as interpretation of stress and tension (Bandura, 1995). In essence, students gain greater self-efficacy through mastery of tasks, but social modeling of peers, faculty, and staff in academia can also be influential.

Although students may judge their performance based on their physiological and emotional responses, social support through persuasion can be influential in “strengthening coping efficacy” (Bandura, 1995, p. 181) to reduce or eliminate the threat of potential stressors. The influence of the college environment, the student’s behavior, and the student’s internal personal factors of cognition, affect, and biology vary in differing circumstances (Bandura, 1997). For example, evaluations and feedback from professors can influence “students’ judgments of their capabilities and scholastic performances” (Bandura, 1997, p. 225). In this study, we used Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy to conceptualize the ways in which sophomore students described their mastery of course-related tasks, social engagement in and out of class, and connection, or lack thereof, to the campus and university, and what influenced their confidence as they navigated changes in their educational environment during the second year.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In prior research, transition advocates elevated awareness of the challenges students face and encouraged the creation of support programs for this critical year (Capik & Schupp, 2023; Kranzow & Foote, 2018; National Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, n.d.; Price-Williams & Sasso, 2024; Schaller, 2018; Schreiner, 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008; Young, 2018). In the review of literature, we considered research specific to native, transfer, and first-generation sophomore students. The following is organized around emergent themes from the literature related to the identity development of sophomore college students, barriers to persistence, and factors of success.

Sophomore Social Identity Development

Traditional sophomore college students move through a very intense cycle of identity development that is influenced by external factors and experiences in the college environment. Chickering (1969) defined identity formation during this time as establishing comfort with one’s gender, body, appearance, cultural heritage, sexual orientation, sense of self, and life role. In a study of intellectual development in the college years, Perry, Jr. (1968) found students experienced development as “primarily internal” (p. 51), while considering pressure and standards from the external environment. Baxter Magolda (2007) maintained students extract themselves from what they acquire from authorities “to define their own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings” and this “involves far more than information and skill acquisition” (p. 69). According to Baxter Magolda (2007), sophomore students advance from absolute knowing, where knowledge is viewed as certain and instructors as authorities, to transitional knowing, where knowledge is uncertain.

Daunting Issues for Sophomores

Hunter et al. (2010) defined the sophomore year as a time for turning inward and exploring how one fits into college life and the world and contended that prolonged indecisiveness, poor academic course selection, low levels of academic and cocurricular engagement, behavioral problems, and increased time to degree completion all can manifest in the sophomore year. In addition, Gahagan and Hunter (2006) distinguished financial hardships, academic concerns, and questioning purpose in life as daunting issues for sophomores.

Schreiner et al. (2012) characterized the sophomore year as a volatile time where students are enrolled in general education courses avoided in the first year, experience increased pressure to declare a major or undergo a competitive admissions process to enter an academic program and have little interaction with faculty. Sophomore students also experience a sense of abandonment and invisibility often associated with the sophomore college experience resulting from a decrease in support systems and first-year programming (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008). At the same time, sophomore students value a sense of belonging, effective academic services, opportunities for intellectual growth, and approachable faculty (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008).

To investigate how sophomores viewed themselves, their relationships, and their academic experiences and decisions, Schaller (2005) conducted a qualitative study at a midsize Catholic university using focus groups and individual interviews and found few sophomore students attained a level of commitment. It is imperative to go beyond perceptions to understand how students' views of their academic experiences relate to their confidence in those choices. According to Schaller (2005), a supportive and encouraging environment in which students feel safe to reflect and explore is conducive to moving students toward a level of commitment. Schreiner (2018) asserted thriving sophomore students function at optimal levels and are psychologically engaged. Both assertions are valid in current higher education settings.

Factors of Sophomore Success

Sophomore success approaches are typically anchored in the first-year experience to prevent the ubiquitous *sophomore slump* (Capik & Shupp, 2023). This has been identified as a deficit approach that decenters concepts of student flourishing or minimizes student academic ability (Perez, 2020). This is a historical artifact in higher education (Freedman, 1956; Lemons & Richmond, 1987). Kennedy and Upcraft (2010) profiled this sophomore slump as academic disengagement, dissociation, career or major indecision, and developmental fugue.

In addition to developmental and psychosocial challenges encountered by sophomore college students, transfer sophomore students must begin anew and establish themselves in an academic environment akin to their first-year experience (Blekic et al., 2020). Barefoot (2008) noted the challenge in higher education in simply identifying students who are considered transfers and how their experiences are similar or different from native sophomore students. Barefoot (2008) stated "the diversity of students, coupled with many pathways of college attendance, require that we go beyond assuming that all students within a certain stage of transition need the same type of assistance" (p. 92). Many assume the services extended to sophomores are well received by all students, but those individuals neglect to realize the transitional issues influencing the move of a sophomore from one academic institution to another.

Perez (2020) examined the flourishing or thriving factors of sophomores to highlight significant individual psychosocial factors such as self-efficacy. Other scholars reported a great deal of self-exploration and questioning of oneself occurs in the sophomore year among college students (DeWitz et al., 2009; Elias, 2008). Many have found stress, social support, and campus climate influential on self-efficacy (Edman & Brazil, 2009; Zajacova et al., 2005). When assessing the transition of college sophomores who are first-generation college students and intent to persist, Vuong et al. (2010) identified sophomores' perceptions as influential on academic performance and persistence (Vuong et al., 2010). Price-Williams and Sasso (2024) identified demographic differences in self-efficacy among 208 college sophomore students. Heterosexual sophomore students reported higher levels of overall self-efficacy ($p = .001$), social efficacy ($p = .004$), and course efficacy ($p = .042$) compared to participants who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning/unsure; traditional students between the ages of 18 and 24 reported higher levels of efficacy compared to posttraditional students who were 25 years of age or over ($p = .016$); and participants who planned to leave the institution reported lower scores in overall self-efficacy ($p = .048$) and social efficacy ($p = .014$; Price-Williams & Sasso, 2024).

METHODS

We employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design encompassing a quantitative analysis (first phase) followed by qualitative interviews (second phase). We collected data from the College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CSEI) to select participants with high and low levels of self-efficacy in the second phase to explore how sophomores characterized their self-efficacy in and outside of the classroom and leveraged support systems to persist. Through a linking method called “connecting” (p. 2139), the sample for the qualitative phase of the design originated from the quantitative results, which is characterized as *integration on the methods level* (Fetters et al., 2013).

Participants and Procedures

The site selected for this study is generically identified as State University and is a predominantly White institution, public, master’s college and university in the Midwest. We used purposive extreme-case sampling to select the respondents who fell within extreme cases (Johnson & Christensen, 2019) or *outliers* and indicated a willingness to participate in an interview. Extreme-case sampling allows for the selection of cases from the extremes as a potentially rich source of information for comparison (Johnson & Christensen, 2019). A total of 208 sophomore students out of the total sophomore population ($N = 2,252$) with 30 to 59 earned credit hours without confidential holds at State University completed the CSEI instrument, resulting in a 9.5% response rate. A total of 168 respondents in the sample ($n = 208$) indicated their willingness to participate in an in-person interview.

To determine the lower and upper ranges for identifying extreme cases, we ranked the self-efficacy scores of the respondents willing to be interviewed from highest to lowest, 10.00 to 3.87. The range of 6.13 was divided to determine the upper, middle, and lower levels of overall mean self-efficacy. Respondents with a self-efficacy score between 3.87 and 5.91 fell within the lower level, while respondents with a score between 7.97 and 10.00 fell within the upper level. Respondents who fell within the middle level were not considered extreme cases and were not invited for an interview. Eleven respondents who agreed to be interviewed were placed in the lower one-third of overall self-efficacy. In addition, 66 respondents constituted the upper one-third of overall self-efficacy with the remainder not determined to be extreme cases. A total of 77 extreme cases were invited by email to participate in an interview.

Data Collection

The CSEI instrument contains 19 items following the statement: “How confident are you that you could successfully complete the following tasks”. The responses are rated on a 10-point scale ranging from a score of 1 as “not at all confident” to a score of 10 as “extremely confident” (Solberg et al., 1993). Three subscales are derived from the response items and are identified as course efficacy, social efficacy, and roommate efficacy (Solberg et al., 1993). Survey results from phase 1 aided in developing open-ended questions for semi-structured interviews. Each semi-structured interview spanned between 15 to 45 minutes, occurred in person, and was audio recorded. A portion of the interview focused on interview participants’ views of self-efficacy as its relation to responses on the CSEI subscales. Participants also describe their levels of confidence in participating in class discussions, engaging with professors and staff, making new friends, or joining student organizations. Finally, participants shared what they believed influenced their confidence. To ensure internal validity of the qualitative data (Merriam, 2009), all 20 participants were sent a copy of their interview transcript for validation. Nine students reviewed their transcript and reported no changes or additions in their email responses.

Data Analysis

Content analysis allowed for identification of patterns or themes in the interview material (Leedy et al., 2012). Merriam (2009) defined content analysis as “the simultaneous coding of raw data and construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics.” (p. 205). Codes are labels that assign symbolic meaning and coding is considered an analysis and interpretation of the meaning of data (Miles et al., 2014). *Vivo coding*, a descriptive coding method, was used in the first cycle of coding in the analysis to assign words or short phrases as codes. In the second cycle of coding, pattern codes were used to group the summaries of the first cycle into categories or themes (Miles et al., 2014). *Pattern coding* helped to condense large amounts of data, to generate early analysis, to develop a cognitive map, and to lay the groundwork for cross-case analysis (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). Coding allowed for distinguishing experiences reported by sophomores with high versus low self-efficacy.

Limitations

This study was executed at one site, which was a public, predominantly White institution in the Midwest; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other academic institutions. The findings are limited to only one point in time in early April and semi-structured interviews were conducted the week before final examinations. The proximity to final exams may have restricted participation as the sophomore students were approaching a heightened period of the semester. Many sophomore students' recollections and challenges occurred in the fall of the second year of college and were resolved by the second semester. More can possibly be gleaned from the collection of data in the fall of the sophomore year. Finally, no academic information was collected from the participants in the study. More specifically, academic information collected from official records can be more valid and useful than self-reports from students themselves. Academic information, such as cumulative grade point average, would be useful in understanding the relationship between college sophomore students' self-efficacy and academic performance.

FINDINGS

A total of 20 extreme cases of sophomore college students accepted an invitation to be interviewed: 5 with low self-efficacy and 15 with high self-efficacy. Over half of the interview participants self-identified as White, non-Hispanic and the majority were of traditional ages between 18 and 24 (see Table 1). Most of those interviewed self-identified as heterosexual, except for two participants. Eight of the interview participants identified as first-generation college students and four of those individuals also identified as one of the eight transfer students. Three of the interview participants were sophomores with 30 to 59 credit hours but were in their first physical year of college on campus due to completion of college credit while in high school. Among the 20 sophomore students who participated in an interview, nine lived on campus and 11 lived off campus.

Table 1: Demographics of Interview Participants

	Total	Black/ Non-Hispanic	Hispanic	2 or More Races	White/ Non-Hispanic
Male	7	1	1	0	5
Female	13	2	2	1	8
First-Generation	8	2	2	0	4
Transfer	8	2	2	1	3
Transfer & First-Generation	4	1	1	0	2
On Campus	9	3	1	0	5
Off-Campus	11	1	2	1	7
Traditional	19	3	2	1	13
Post-traditional	1	0	1	0	0

Among the five sophomore college students with low self-efficacy (see Table 2), four lived off campus and none of the five were involved on campus. Three of the five with low self-efficacy were first-generation college students. Two of the first-generation college students with low self-efficacy were transfer sophomores and the third was an early sophomore who completed college credit while in high school to qualify as a sophomore but were in their first year of college.

Fifteen participants reported high levels of overall self-efficacy (see Table 3). Most transfer students in this group lived off campus and were not involved on campus. In contrast, all but one of the native sophomore students with high self-efficacy were involved on campus. These participants reported high confidence in academic courses and social tasks. Most of the students with high self-efficacy described strong social support from family members and peers through involvement on campus. Three themes emerged from the analysis: deficits in efficacy in completion of course-related tasks, externally motivated social engagement, and involvement fostered connectivity and growth in self-efficacy.

The cross-case analysis revealed profound disparities between the two groups with low and high levels of overall self-efficacy. The sophomore students in this group with lower levels of overall self-efficacy mostly lived off campus and were not involved in any activities or organizations on campus. This group struggled with reading textbooks, text anxiety, and managing their time. The sophomores with lower overall efficacy reported lower levels of confidence in

Table 2: Lower 1/3 Self-Efficacy Interview Responses

Scores	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Ashley SE 1.63 CE 6.43 RE N/A SES 3.87	Low-confidence class discussion Size of Class Low confidence in meeting new people No Friends on or off-campus Works on campus Medium confidence speaking with a professor	Low confidence in reading textbooks Does not read textbooks Does not take books to class Low confidence in time management Procrastination/ Low Motivation Confident in writing	Off-Campus Lives with Family	Native Sophomore Low evidence of esteem Support- Siblings/ No parental support Not involved on campus Works on campus
Jasmine SE 4.38 CE 4.00 RE 3.75 SES 4.11	Confident in speaking in class No confidence in meeting new people Nervous about meeting new people High confidence in speaking to a professor	Confident in reading textbooks Skims textbooks, boring, repetitive High confidence in writing Low confidence in test-taking Test anxiety Confident in note-taking	On campus Confident in sharing space/ chores	Transfer sophomore First-generation Interview responses do not reflect the survey Not involved on campus
Monica SE 5.00 CE 5.14 RE 7.00 SES 5.47	Confident in speaking in class Median confidence in meeting people Confident in speaking to professors	Confident in reading textbooks When necessary Effort reflects perception Low confidence in writing skills Low confidence in time management Confidence in test-taking	Off-campus Lives with Family	Transfer Sophomore Works off-campus No parental involvement, First generation Challenges in studying Not involved on campus
Adam SE 2.50 CE 9.00 RE N/A SES 5.53	Low-confidence class discussion Focused on others' perceptions Conflict avoidance No confidence in meeting new people No Friends on campus Prefer to email professor	Confident in reading textbooks Time consuming and boring Pays off Confident in academic work Sets high goals for self	Off-campus Lives with Family	Early sophomore Carpools with a friend Not involved on campus No mention of parental support, First-generation URCA Program
Sierra SE 5.13 CE 6.14 RE N/A SES 5.60	Low-confidence class discussion Nervous in class Focused on others' perceptions Low confidence in meeting new people No on-campus network Works on campus Confidence in speaking with a professor	Low confidence in reading textbooks Does not read textbooks. Overwhelming/ Low comprehension High confidence in note-taking Low-confidence in test-taking Test anxiety	Off-campus Lives with Family	Transfer Sophomore Off-campus friends Has a mentor Not involved on campus Parental support

Note. SE = Social Efficacy, CE = Course Efficacy, RE = Roommate Efficacy, SES = Overall Self-Efficacy Score

Table 3: Upper 1/3 Self-Efficacy Interview Responses

Case	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Thomas SE 9.00 CE 7.71 RE 6.00 SES 7.89	High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in class discussion Median confidence meeting new people	High confidence in writing & test taking Low confidence in time management- overwhelmed	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Early Sophomore Leader in a fraternity Involved in clubs sports on campus
Maria SE 6.50 CE 9.71 RE N/A SES 8.00	High confidence speaking to professor Medium confidence in class discussion Prefer to email professor Low confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in taking notes High confidence in taking tests High confidence in reading textbooks	Lives off campus with family	Transfer Sophomore Post-traditional, First- generation Does not feel connected
Juan SE 9.00 CE 8.14 RE 6.00 SES 8.05	High confidence in class discussion High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing skills Low confidence in test taking Low confidence in managing time-work schedule	Lives off campus with roommates Having difficulty in roommate situation	Native Sophomore First-generation Involved on campus Works off campus
Noah SE 8.00 CE 8.14 RE N/A SES 8.07	Medium confidence in class discussion Depends on class size/ comfort Concerned with others' perceptions High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing Medium confidence in reading textbooks Boring and rented, will read if necessary High confidence in test taking	Off campus Lives with family	Transfer Sophomore First-generation Not involved on campus
Abigail SE 7.00 CE 9.57 RE 8.50 SES 8.26	Low confidence in class discussion Concerned with others' perceptions High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in test taking Low confidence in writing Trying to conform to professor opinions Really worried about own opinion	On campus Low confidence in negotiating chores/ space. Conflict avoidance	Native Sophomore Joined sorority Involved in Exercise Science club and Big Brothers/Big Sisters Organization
Michelle SE 8.75 CE 7.86 RE N/A SES 8.33	High confidence in class discussion High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in reading textbooks Medium confidence in test-taking, anxiety High confidence in note taking	Off campus Lives alone	Transfer Sophomore No Friends No Family Support Not involved on campus

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Case	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Antony SE 8.38 CE 8.43 RE 8.25 SES 8.37	High confidence in meeting new people High confidence in class discussion Speech class influenced confidence High confidence speaking to professor	Low confidence in fall of sophomore year in all areas Reported higher confidence in spring of sophomore year	On campus Some difficulty with roommate- resolved	Native Sophomore International student H.S. in U.S. Teaches fitness classes on campus
Charles SE 8.63 CE 8.14 RE 8.50 SES 8.42	High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in taking notes High confidence in taking tests High confidence in reading textbooks	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Transfer Sophomore Sibling support- brother RA on campus
Andrew SE 10.00 CE 10.00 RE 3.25 SE 8.58	High confidence in class discussion More confident than past College is open and free, non-judgmental High confidence speaking to professor/ staff Mid-confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in time management Uses a planner; plans ahead Medium confidence in reading textbooks New to reading textbooks Time consuming Confident in note taking	On campus Now confident in negotiating chores/ sharing space Prior issues resolved; H.S. friend moved out	Transfer Sophomore Strong social support Positive staff encounters with staff, advising, RA in dorm
Kayla SE 8.38 CE 8.86 RE N/A SES 8.60	Medium confidence in class discussion Shy High confidence speaking to professor Medium confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing High confidence in reading textbooks Medium confidence in time management Procrastination	Off campus Lives with family	Transfer Sophomore First-generation Family support from uncle and older cousin No involvement on campus
Beth SE 8.88 CE 8.71 RE 8.00 SES 8.63	Medium confidence in class discussion Concerned with others' perceptions High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing skills Medium confidence in test taking	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Native Sophomore Focused Interest Community
Chloe SE 9.00 CE 9.14 RE 8.25 SES 8.89	High confidence in class discussion High confidence in meeting new people High confidence speaking to professor	Low confidence in time management Procrastination, classes not a priority Not motivated about gen ed courses Just "muddling through"	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Native Sophomore Sibling and sorority support Sorority is priority

Case	Social SE	Course SE	Roommate SE	Notes
Kiana SE 8.88 CE 8.57 RE 10.00 SES 9.00	High confidence in class discussion High confidence speaking to professor/ staff Sees networking opportunity Advance learning; mentoring High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in time management Plans ahead High confidence in test-taking	Off campus with roommates High confidence in negotiating chores/ space.	Native Sophomore Strong social support- family/student organization First-generation
Molly SE 8.50 CE 9.43 RE 10.00 SES 9.16	Medium confidence in class discussion Will email professor or TA High confidence speaking to professor High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in managing time Low confidence in test taking-anxiety High confidence in reading textbooks	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space	Early Sophomore Sorority Student nursing group RA in Residence Life
Amy SE 10.00 CE 9.14 RE 9.25 SES 9.53	Mid-confidence in class discussion Tries to figure out on own Contingent upon student's mood Confident speaking to professor/ staff Must be welcoming High confidence in meeting new people	High confidence in writing Confident in reading textbooks Works harder on major courses Uses memorization for gen ed courses	On campus High confidence in negotiating chores/ space. Prior issues resolved; roommate moved	Native Sophomore Strong social support Joined clubs Works on campus SI instructor on campus

Note. SE = Social Efficacy, CE = Course Efficacy, RE = Roommate Efficacy, SES = Overall Self-Efficacy Score

engagement in class and meeting new people. These participants were less involved on campus than students with high efficacy and reported little or no connection to State University.

Deficits in Efficacy in Completion of Course-Related Tasks

Regardless of high or low self-efficacy scores, participants revealed a lack of confidence in course-related tasks. Their self-assessments were incongruent with skills and tasks typically associated with student success. This indicates a possibility that reports on the CSEI instrument may be inflated. Four students reported high confidence in writing abilities but provided no evidence of success nor did they share any influence on their writing abilities. Several transfer students acknowledged prior struggles with writing in college. Noah stated, "I didn't do as well as I wanted to grade-wise last semester, but I feel like I'm doing better this semester." Monica self-identified as "weak" in writing, but valued feedback and attributed the source of her growth to the professor. Although most interview participants reported high levels of confidence in taking notes, the way in which some of the transfer sophomore students approached notetaking or used notetaking in courses varied. For example, Sierra seemed to lack the skill or a method in note taking and remarked, "I think I'm really good at taking notes, just because I usually try and write down everything." Another student relied heavily on notetaking to perform successfully in courses. Charles exclaimed, "If I just take good notes and at least show up to class, I'd be able to retain enough information."

Half of the college sophomores stated they do not read their textbooks and characterized the event as boring, repetitive, and time-consuming. Reading textbooks was especially a challenge for participants with lower overall self-efficacy. Most of the transfer students' statements related to a lack of skills in reading and comprehending their textbooks. Andrew stated, "I've never had to do that in my previous years. I had to figure out ways to help myself learn." Another student stated they did not like reading textbooks at the same time they admitted low confidence with the task. Sierra stated, "I'm not good at comprehending stuff that I read, especially if it's my biology." Jasmine reported a strong reliance on taking notes and resolved to "skim" the text. Another transfer male student spoke in economic terms of reading textbooks. Charles recognized he "probably should be reading" because he is paying for school. At the same time, Charles acknowledged that he did not even open some books "because I know that just by doing certain things, there's other things that I can exclude and I can still be successful."

Six of the 20 students reported low levels of confidence in taking tests and quizzes. One student explained her ability to attain a decent grade, even if she studied the night before. Chloe stated, "I kind of often study the night before an exam and get a B, so that's not too bad." Many spoke of their battle with nervousness and anxiety, including transfer students. Sierra explained,

I feel like I psych myself out when I take tests and quizzes, which I tend to do in all areas of my life, honestly. I'm not diagnosed with anxiety, but I say I have

really bad anxiety, because I just get really worked up over little things. It messes with my concentration and how I perform with whatever task I'm doing. I don't know. I'm not a good test taker.

“Overthinking” and “questioning oneself” were described about test-taking by other transfer students. The impact of text anxiety was realized by Molly when she stated, “I have terrible, terrible, terrible test anxiety. That is my one weakness that has not really strengthened in my transition to college.”

Time management is another area in which both native and transfer participants reported low levels of confidence. Ashley allocated a verbal score of “zero” to this effort and stated, “I just got three zeros on three assignments because I forgot to do them.” Thomas reported it is an area of struggle that often leaves him feeling overwhelmed. Two students, one native, and one transfer, spoke of their struggles in balancing their workload with other demands in their life. Juan stated, “I struggle too with the time management because with my job now I work all overnight shifts and so that has become a struggle for me.” Monica explained the challenges in working, going to school, and balancing both with a social life, “It's like I can run myself into the ground with this and have no social life and have no ‘me’ time or I can split it to where get the most important super stuff done with good quality.”

Externally Motivated Social Engagement

Sophomore students’ motivation and purpose for engagement relied upon external factors. This external influence included environmental and interpersonal factors. This suggests participants lacked the ability to cultivate and trust their inner voice. The data also revealed a shortfall in a broader meaning-making capacity to develop interpersonal relations rather than transactional relations.

First, speaking in class and meeting new people were challenges for the sophomore students with lower self-efficacy, of which only one was native. Sophomore students in this group who reported lower confidence in speaking in class were focused on others’ perceptions, were nervous about speaking in front of others, and wanted to avoid conflict in class discussions. Class size impacted engagement, wherein if the course held too many students or too few students, the comfort level of the student changed.

Charles, a transfer, stated he does not participate because he is forced to take general education courses in which he has no interest. Adam, an early sophomore, stated he did not participate because he did not want to be judged by others or seem lacking in knowledge. Chloe felt more comfortable, like the two male students, when the class size is smaller and environmentally conducive for discussion. The other students with high confidence in this type of engagement were fond of group discussion, more likely to ask questions if confused, and considered themselves open-minded.

The interview participants were asked to describe their level of confidence in interaction with faculty and staff outside of class. The majority of the sophomore students who responded to this question were confident in talking to professors or staff outside of class. However, the motivation for doing so varied for some. For some, seeking out professors was self-serving to increase one’s academic

performance in class. Many of the transfer students sought out professors for political reasons to somehow advance themselves within their major or within the course but lacked understanding on how this could benefit their learning. Monica stated,

Anytime I see a professor especially if it's one that I don't really interact much in the classroom with. If I see them outside the classroom, I might just like introduce myself. Possibly talk about the topic that was discussed, umm just to get my name out there, just so they know who I am.

Jasmine responded, "Most of the time I'm just quiet. Being able to have an actual conversation with my classmate or teacher, it's an accomplishment."

Many of the sophomore students with high confidence in meeting new people reported involvement in activities or work that cultivated their interaction with others. For example, Charles, a resident advisor on campus explained, "I would say I have plenty of confidence when it comes to dealing new people or new situations of meeting new people because partially that's my job but at the same time I feel it's just my personality." Beth, who lived in a focus interest community in residential housing, found that experience to be "extremely helpful . . . as far as meeting new people."

Five sophomore students described their interaction with new people as contingent upon the approachability and friendliness of the other party and common interests. Some transfer students described themselves as nervous, shy, careful, and standoffish. When speaking of her experience on campus, Monica stated, "One to 10, 10 being amazing and one being awful, I think a 4 because people seem hostile when you try to approach them or something." Sierra disclosed she has no close friends and prefers to be with other family members. Neither of the two students lived on campus or were involved in any clubs or organizations. One post-traditional learner, Maria, described her experience as difficult in finding other students on campus with similar interests in her age group. She stated,

I mean, I know a few girls that are in my classes that are my same age, but their maturity levels are different that's why I'm not . . . I mean, I got three kids at home and school and that's my main focus. Sometimes I do cut through the engineering building and that's, obviously, male-dominated still. Just walking through there with all my art stuff, you'll get the odd, weird glances. That intimidated me enough to where I don't walk through there anymore.

When asked, Maria said she would embrace the opportunity to interact with other undergraduate students in her age group. As a first-generation, post-traditional learner, Maria reported she almost withdrew from attendance at State University, because of the social environment.

Involvement Fostered Connectivity and Growth in Self-Efficacy

To understand environmental influences on the self-efficacy of the interview participants, each was asked in what way they felt connected to the campus and the university. Even further, participants were prompted to share any experiences inside or outside of the classroom on campus that supported or hindered the development of their confidence. To identify the sophomore students' support system, or lack thereof, and understand how they navigate the educational environment, the interview

participants were asked to describe their level of confidence in dealing with obstacles in college. The findings indicated involvement fostered connectivity and growth in self-efficacy. Students who lived on campus and were engaged in an activity, and/or had family members who attended State University, reported connectivity compared to students who lived off campus and were not engaged.

Seven of the 20 sophomore students who participated in an interview described a lack of connection to State University. Three of the seven sophomore students associated their lack of connection with living off campus and lack of involvement in on-campus events. Even though Ashley is a native sophomore, she identified her only connection as “being an employee on campus.” Adam attributed his lack of connection to living off-campus. He stated, “I just come here and go to school and come home and so I don’t do that much here. I come here to go to school.” Adam’s only involvement is in the undergraduate research program, where he serves as an undergraduate research assistant. Sierra, a transfer student living off campus, felt the on-campus activities were for students who live on campus. Among two Hispanic, female students who lived off campus, one student felt less connected than she expected to be and the other described herself as “uncomfortable here because it’s still new.” Monica described many barriers to her attempts to become involved and found the campus climate to be unwelcoming. She stated,

There are so many activities, like clubs and organizations, but they’re very hard to get a hold of. I’m a commuter now and it’s just the different times and the days that I’m here, I’m always in class so they’re like we have something over here going on but I have class at that time. I feel like there it’s not the strong of the community here as my other school. I feel like there’s more of a tension of segregation here on campus.

The remainder of the participants described a positive connection to campus. Three students, who all lived on campus during their first 2 years, associated their connection to campus relative to faculty, staff, or location. Other students associated their connection with involvement in student organizations, activities, or sorority/fraternity life. One student described her connection to campus in relation to the attendance of other family members at State University.

Andrew, a native sophomore who lives on campus, described his connection to campus in a positive light. He characterized the faculty and staff on campus as helpful and stated, “I definitely love it here.” Kiana and Beth depicted their connection to campus in relation to the campus location and size. Kiana, a native of New York City who moved off campus with roommates in the second semester of her sophomore year, explained she was able to formulate more personal relationships with people on the small campus compared to the lifestyle one lives in a large city. Beth, a native sophomore, spoke positively about her experiences on campus and the support of university employees. She stated,

I like how I feel that the university really pushes people. They want you to succeed. That’s one thing that I really like about this university. It’s a very rural campus and I grew up in a very small rural community, so that’s one way that I feel connected.

Other interview participants associated their positive connection to campus with their involvement in student organizations or attendance of athletic events on campus.

Two male students, one who lived on campus and one who lived off campus, described their attendance of athletic events and connection “to other fans.” Juan, a first-generation, native sophomore lived on campus and worked as a desk manager in university housing. He found his work on campus provided an opportunity “to establish relationships, professional relationships with like people.” Juan was involved in a service organization for students he described “as making a difference and what we do is a good thing so that’s one way that I feel connected to the university outside my work.”

Four of the interview participants associated their connection to campus through their involvement in a sorority or fraternity on campus. Chloe, a native sophomore who lived off campus with roommates stated her involvement, “keeps me really connected to campus.” Thomas, a native sophomore, stated his fraternity membership “makes me feel like this is where I should be.” Even though Abigail lives off-campus, she feels highly connected and stated, “I think that really gets me connected because you meet other organizations and I am also in exercise science club, Big Brothers Big Sisters so that keeps me connected, too.” Whether sophomores lived on or off campus, participants who reported a positive connection to the university also described some level of involvement. The following is a discussion of the findings and implications for practice.

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study revealed students with low self-efficacy were not involved on campus, struggled with academic tasks, and were less engaged in class and meeting new people as determined by Hunter et al. (2010) and Price-Williams and Sasso (2024) to be challenges in the sophomore year. This lack of involvement may connect to a feeling of invisibility noted in prior research (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Sanchez-Leguinel, 2008; Tobolowsky, 2008). Experiences of students living on campus can differ from those of commuters. Students who lived off campus did not speak confidently about the potential of engagement. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) asserted that students living on campus might be psychologically more open to the impact of the college environment than commuters.

In comparison, the sophomores with high levels of self-efficacy reported high confidence in social engagement and course-related tasks. Yet, most transfer students in this group lived off campus and those students were not involved in any activities or organizations, unlike the native sophomore students with high self-efficacy. Even further, transfer sophomores in the study who were first-generation and lived off campus lacked a strong support network (i.e., family, mentors, peers), which mirrors existing research on first-generation sophomore students (Capik & Schupp, 2023).

Differences in efficacy are context-specific and can be highly impactful on student performance and success. In addition to differences identified in course-related contexts, interview participants identified numerous instances where their level of social efficacy was lower, which mirrors sophomore transitional issues discussed in earlier studies (Sanchez-Leguinel, 2008; Schreiner et al., 2012; Tobolowsky, 2008). This was especially true for sophomore transfer students and early sophomores who only completed one or two semesters at State University. At

the end of the second semester of the sophomore year, many students in this study were still attempting to overcome those challenges.

Reading and comprehending textbooks were reported as areas in which the interview participants held the lowest course efficacy. There is an expectation for college students to comprehend and apply what is read in textbooks to the course curriculum. Yet, the interview participants identified comprehension and time management as barriers to reading as a part of their study regimen and prized their ability to adapt regardless of their lack of preparation. These are sophomore academic challenges experienced across academic programs (Esteppe et al., 2019).

Many of the interview participants relied heavily on the professor for the transference of knowledge, thus, removing themselves as responsible for learning as found by Baxter Magolda (1992). In addition to reading textbooks, many of the interview participants struggled with efficacy in writing. Many reported their struggles to conform to what is expected of the professor. Similarly, some of the sophomore participants restricted their engagement in class to avoid confrontation in fear of the perceptions of others. Baxter Magolda et al. (2010) identified areas of struggle for first- and second-year students “to judge the credibility of information, to consider their own values, to recognize stereotypes, and to navigate diverse opinions” (p. 211). These struggles seemed to be paramount for interview participants who reported low efficacy in course-related tasks.

Future research should consider different subsets of transfer students as the diversity of contemporary college students is shifting (Blekic et al., 2020). There are different subpopulations of sophomores. Early sophomores constitute a subset of what can be a very diverse sophomore population (high school students who acquire college credit) and are increasing on college campuses. Lateral or reverse transfers are also an increasing population of sophomores. These subpopulations should be examined across institutional types such as public versus private. Their self-efficacy should be examined in the first semester of their second year.

Implications for Practice

More than ever, the persistence of college students beyond the sophomore year is detrimental to the fiscal vitality of an institution in higher education. Early efforts of colleges and universities to support the transition of college students beyond the freshman year may be instrumental in combatting post-sophomore attrition. An expanded focus requires institutions to think differently about student transitions and persistence across the academy. These findings mirror similar findings in the current literature. The creation of a welcoming environment with space on campus for commuters, the fostering of a connection to the university through involvement, and the identification of sophomore students who may be at risk for attrition are key strategies for supporting student success and persistence. To integrate the findings from this study, institutional initiatives might include innovation of sophomore programming to include transfer orientation, the construction of a sophomore success program, and the enhancement of student–faculty relationships.

Innovation of Transfer Orientation Programming

Although transition programming is more common at private institutions in the sophomore year and focuses on career planning, major selection, and academic advising (Blekic et al., 2020; National Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, n.d.; Tobolowsky, 2008), there is a need to innovate transfer orientation programming to support first-generation transfer students in the sophomore year. The findings of this study also indicated first-generation transfer sophomores are less likely to enter with a support network (Blekic et al., 2020; Capik & Shupp, 2023). Gahagan and Hunter (2006) stated “retooling existing initiatives and developing new programs are two solid strategies for improving the experience of second-year students” (p. 19).

One might find a typical transfer orientation to include a transcript review, academic advising, a campus tour, and exposure to services provided by the registrar (i.e., student identification), parking services, and textbook services. Transfer orientation is an opportunity for social engagement and networking, and this should expand beyond icebreakers or speed-dating exercises (Sterling, 2018). For example, roundtable discussions during orientation based on academic and social interests (i.e., undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning; Kranzow & Foote, 2018) would allow for small-group discussion in more depth. Moreover, faculty facilitation of the roundtables would allow for conversations centered on course-related tasks and expectations. Although transfer orientation is rarely mandatory, a higher yield may result from the promotion of program outcomes and the opportunity to engage with faculty.

Construction of a Sophomore Success Program

Tinto (2012) maintained students are more likely to succeed in educational environments where expectations are clear and high, where academic and social support is provided, where performance assessment and feedback are ongoing, and where students are actively involved in and outside of the classroom. Institutions should formalize a sophomore success program and integrate it into broader campus-wide enrollment management plans (Sterling, 2018).

A sophomore success program should connect students to an “intellectual commons,” such as a midpoint success seminar to integrate career and major exploration (Schaller, 2018). Public institutions continue to fall behind private colleges and universities in cultivating visibility and undergraduate class identity (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) among sophomores. Programming devised in private institutions included publications directed to sophomores to help create a class identity, retreats, class trips, and social gatherings to build community (Tobolowsky, 2008).

This program should also formalize experiential learning opportunities across high-impact practices (HIPs; Provencher & Kassel, 2019). Young et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of HIPs as sophomore initiatives but challenged institutions to consider quality, effectiveness, and outcomes when developing programming. HIPs have a cumulative effect over time through participation and

influence sophomore persistence (Provencher & Kassel, 2019). Higher education administrators should be intentional in program development to facilitate expansion in social capital (Schaller, 2018), be clear about the intended outcomes, and encourage attendees to engage in expanding their network.

Enhancement of Student–Faculty Relationships

Although participants in this study reported confidence in talking to professors outside of class, their motivations varied, lacked meaning, and were infrequent. Yet, those with low self-efficacy struggled with course-related tasks such as reading textbooks, preparing for exams, and time management. These deficits resulted in lower performance and self-efficacy. Schreiner and Tobolowsky (2018) maintained a lack of interaction intensifies disengagement or dissatisfaction in the classroom. The authors also articulated the value of formal and informal interaction. A starting point is knowledge; faculty can benefit from expanded knowledge of student transitions, especially those experienced by sophomores. With smaller classes, sophomores can benefit from short mid-point informal meetings with faculty to connect and develop social capital (Schreiner & Tobolowsky, 2018). Large class sizes can be a barrier to one-on-one meetings. However, faculty can socialize students to the discipline (Schreiner & Tobolowsky, 2018), intentionally define and model the student–relationship, and optimize their teaching style to influence students’ mastery of course efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study present new ways of thinking about specific initiatives through which institutions can more intentionally facilitate sophomore success. Engagement of institutional stakeholders with sophomores may support the expansion of their self-efficacy, which leads to persistence toward graduation. Institutions should crystalize and formalize a sophomore success program using enrollment management frameworks. These efforts should also involve faculty crucial in defining and modeling the faculty–student relationship inside and outside of class, especially when the learning environment is large in size. The college environment heavily influences the self-efficacy of sophomore students and holds the potential to assuage barriers associated with the second-year transition. Campus communities, irrespective of size and type, should celebrate and support all college sophomores, native and transfer, through effective and innovative programming.

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