

# Great Expectations and the Ultimate Reality Check: Voices of Students During the Transition from High School to College

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*Although previous research provides empirical support for the “Freshman Myth,” qualitative inquiry is necessary to enhance our understanding of the content, complexities, and impact of students’ expectations about college. The current study analyzes in-depth interview data from nine students at three key time points in their transition from high school to college to provide new insights into the nature of students’ expectations about college, their subsequent first-year experiences, and how expectation fulfillment or disillusionment affects students’ adjustment to college. Findings revealed two new areas of student expectations about college: interpersonal relationships and personal development. Further, while their personal and interpersonal experiences in college resulted in some expectation disillusionment, most notably with respect to roommates, students generally felt well adjusted and that their first-year experiences lived up to their expectations. Specifically, their relationships with their families, exposure to new people and ideas, pursuit of personally and professionally relevant coursework, and progress toward their goals for individual development all met or exceeded*

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*their precollege expectations. The practical, methodological, and theoretical implications of these results are discussed, which help broaden our current understanding of student expectations about college, provide meaningful feedback to faculty and staff at the high school and college levels, and inform future research in this area.*

During the latter half of the twentieth century, several factors have led young people to become increasingly aware of the importance of college. Changes in the American economy, most notably the growth of information technology and service industries and the decline of manufacturing and heavy industry (Cohen, 1998; Lucas, 1994), have reinforced the belief that attending college is the key to a good job and a successful economic future (Becker, 1993, 1996; Bowen, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). Higher education has also become more salient in our national consciousness due to social changes and national policy initiatives such as the G.I. Bill, the Civil Rights Act, student financial aid programs, and affirmative action admissions policies, all of which highlight issues of educational quality, access, and equity. These and similar state legislative initiatives have encouraged several historically underrepresented groups to think about higher education in a manner that they hadn't considered before (Cohen, 1998; Lucas, 1994).

Still another factor raising students' awareness of higher education is the media. Americans have been bombarded with imagery about college and university life from sources ranging from newsmagazines to popular television programming. In addition, colleges themselves have become much more assertive in marketing to prospective students via a wide variety of direct mail and other recruiting strategies (Fallows, 2003; Kuh, 1991). All of these forces have combined to shape the specific ideas, perceptions, and expectations about colleges and universities of society at large, and particularly among college-bound youth. These expectations about college have the potential to impact how prospective students view postsecondary options, how they make choices about college, and most importantly, their patterns of behavior once they enter a higher education institution (Eagly & Chaiken 1998; Feist, 1990; Kuh, 1991; Maddux, 1999; Miller, 2005; Schilling & Schilling, 1999, 2005).

The fact that prospective college students are especially likely to be the targets of all this imagery and information about college does not mean that the resultant ideas are particularly helpful, or even based on fact. Research on student expectations indicates that the ideas and perceptions about college held by potential students are often more romanticized notions than accurate reflections of college life. More than three decades ago, Stern (1966, 1970) found that students tended to have extremely high expectations about all aspects of the college that they entered. In addition, these expectations of college were consistently more positive than the subsequent experiences these same students reported after attending the institution. Stern concluded that “university-bound high school seniors evidently share a highly idealized image of college life representative of no actual institutions at all” (1970, p. 173), a phenomenon for which he coined the term “Freshman Myth.” While Stern was among the first to identify and label this trend of unrealistic student expectations, many researchers have since confirmed his findings in numerous settings and with different student samples (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Berdie, 1966; Buckley, 1971; Darlston-Jones et al., 2003; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Herr, 1971; Pervin, 1966; Shaw, 1968). Further research shows that the “Freshman Myth” extends beyond students’ ideas about the environment to include their expectations about their own behavior and performance in that environment (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Baker & Schultz, 1992a, 1992b), such that Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) stated that “students also expect more of themselves than is subsequently realized,” (p. 94) with respect to their adjustment and commitment to college.

Continuing along the vein of inquiry established by Stern (1966, 1970) and the “Freshman Myth,” other studies have examined the influence of unmet expectations (i.e., “disillusionment”) on the experiences and outcomes of entering college students. This research indicates that disillusionment appears to be associated with less adaptive behaviors among first-year students (Herr, 1971; Shaw, 1968), student disengagement (Berdie, 1966; Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995), lower levels of adjustment (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994), and student attrition (Bean, 1980, 1982a, 1982b; Herr, 1971; Shaw, 1968). Still other studies suggest that a more accurate image of college is related to positive student experiences and performance during the first year of college including grade

point average (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Lauterbach & Vielhaber, 1966; Smith & Wertlieb, 2005), classroom experiences (Gigliotti, 1987; Koermer & Petelle, 1991), and receipt of academic honors (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985). In sum, this body of work has yielded strong theoretical connections between expectation fulfillment and various measures of student success as well as between expectation disillusionment and negative student outcomes of college.

The use of primarily quantitative measures in previous research on student expectations has necessarily limited the categories and types of student expectations that could be explored. Although these studies have provided valuable information on student expectations, open-ended inquiries offer the possibility of uncovering new information about the content and complexities of student expectations about college. Recently, a group of researchers investigated student expectations and their outcomes using open-ended questions at the end of a survey (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt & Hunsberger, 2000; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000), thereby providing students the opportunity to articulate their expectations “without defining their dimensions a priori” (Pancer et al., p. 43). The results of these investigations revealed two new thematic veins in the research on student expectations about college: (1) the degree of complexity and multidimensionality of students’ expectations about college is positively related to first-year adjustment; and (2) certain characteristics of student expectations, especially their adaptive nature, are related to stress, coping skills, and integration during the transition from high school to college. Through the qualitative feedback collected from both studies, it was possible to obtain a greater understanding about the nature of student expectations about college and the relationship between student expectations and adjustment to college.

The current study built upon this qualitative research on student expectations through a series of longitudinal open-ended interviews that allowed for detailed feedback from students throughout their transition from high school to college. This methodological approach has the potential to provide a better understanding of the full range of students’ precollege expectations and their possible effects on adjustment during the first year of college than has been previously achieved in quantitative inquiry on the topic. Several questions helped guide the inquiry, including:

1. Which aspects of college life do students consider when forming their expectations?
2. In what ways are students' precollege expectations met during the first year? In what ways do they go unfulfilled?
3. What are the consequences of expectation fulfillment or disillusionment, particularly for students' feelings of satisfaction, personal success, and adjustment?

Qualitative analyses thus allowed for the in-depth exploration of the broadest possible range of student expectations, relevant college experiences, and resultant outcomes.

## Methodology

### Site and Sample Selection

The initial field site for the study was a private, coeducational, Catholic high school located on the west side of Los Angeles. As this study focuses on the expectations of college-bound students, the site was selected for its curricular emphasis on college preparatory programs (e.g., academic requirements reflect University of California and California State University entrance qualifications and the curriculum offers advanced placement and honors programs), although the school does have a substantial program of remedial education. In addition, this high school welcomes students from a large geographic area and with a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, races/ethnicities, socioeconomic status, and academic preparation. Table 1 provides specific institutional characteristics and demographic information for the high school during the academic year that the students for the current study were recruited.

The target population for this research was college-bound students who met the following criteria: (1) they were in their last year of instruction at the institution (i.e., have senior-class standing and be on schedule to graduate from high school in June 2000); (2) they were submitting applications to 4-year colleges and universities; and (3) they did *not* have institutional roles or individual status that would afford them particular training or specialized knowledge regarding the

**Table 1**  
**Characteristics of Research Site for 1999–2000 Academic Year**

<b>Institutional Variable</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Gender Breakdown<sup>a</sup></b>	
Women	53
Men	47
<b>Racial/Ethnic Breakdown<sup>a</sup></b>	
White/Caucasian	34
Latino/Chicano	30
Black/African American	21
Asian/Asian American	14
Native American	1
<b>Educational Attainment and Success<sup>b</sup></b>	
Graduation rate by June 2000	95
Acceptance at 4-year college or university for fall 2000	65

Notes:

<sup>a</sup>Includes all students attending the high school (grades 9–12) during the 1999–2000 academic year; *N* = 576.

<sup>b</sup>Includes only seniors in the 1999–2000 academic year; *N* = 131.

application process or the college experience (e.g., students who served as college peer counselors, student assistants to the college counselor, students who were highly recruited athletes). Out of a total of 131 students in the senior class at the high school, the senior class counselor recommended 25 male and 25 female students who met these criteria to receive recruitment materials that outlined the study and offered an incentive to respond. The first ten students to respond to the recruitment efforts were invited to participate in the study. All but one proved willing and able to be interviewed for the study. This same pool of nine students was invited to participate in two follow-up interviews.

As shown in Table 2, the sample of interviewees included two male and seven female college-bound high school students who classified themselves ethnically/racially as Latina, Asian American, African American, and Native American. These students represent a broad range of socioeconomic status as defined by the occupations (e.g., construction worker, assembler, teacher, research chemist, attor-

ney) and educational level of the students' parents. The nine interviewees performed well academically in high school and were very engaged in extra-curricular activities in both their high school and local communities (e.g., athletics, ethnic/cultural clubs, service/volunteer organizations, high school yearbook staff, student government, drama, and part-time employment). At the time of the initial interview, participants were interested in a wide array of colleges and universities and ultimately elected to attend colleges of various institutional types, controls, and sizes (see Table 2).

The goal for the current study was not to draw comparisons between genders, ethnicities, or any other individual attributes or to generalize these findings to the experiences of all college-bound high school students in all institutional settings. Rather, the aim of this research was to provide a thorough, accurate, and rich description of the precollege expectations and first-year experiences for one cohort of students during their transition from high school to college.

In light of this research design, the sample was intentionally limited to a small number of students to allow for in-depth data collection and analysis. Fortunately, the students who elected to participate in the study had a broad range of background characteristics, high school experiences, and college environments. However, there are some important areas of overlap among the informants that must be addressed. Most notable are the facts that women are over-represented in the sample, none of the participants classified themselves as White/Caucasian, and that all of the students came from a private, college preparatory high school. Therefore, although Stern (1966, 1970) and others (e.g., Baker, McNeil & Siryk, 1985; Berdie, 1966; Buckey 1971; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Gigliotti & Secrest, 1988; Hicks, 2003; Pervin, 1966) found that the nature of expectations about college and the "Freshman Myth" are similar across gender, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics as well as institutional environment, one might interpret these results as a representation of a particular personal perspective (e.g., that of female and/or historically underrepresented students) or educational context (i.e., a Catholic high school).

Further, it is important to mention that although the students in the current study attended a wide array of baccalaureate-granting colleges

**Table 2**  
**Background and Educational Characteristics of the Participants**

Name <sup>1</sup>	Gender	Ethnicity	SES of Mother's Profession	SES of Father's Profession	Mother's Education <sup>3</sup>	Father's Education <sup>3</sup>	High School GPA <sup>4</sup>	Type of College Attended
Mary	Female	African American	Medium	High	Graduate/Professional Degree	Graduate/Professional Degree	3.0–3.49	Historically Black College <sup>5</sup>
Alexandra	Female	Latina	Medium	Low	Some College	Some College	3.0–3.49	Small private university
Jamie	Female	Asian American	Medium	Low	Some College	High School	4.0 or higher	University of California (UC) institution
Jules	Female	Latina	Low	Medium	High School	College Degree	3.5–3.99	UC institution
Isabelle	Female	Latina	Low	Low	High School	High School	3.0–3.49	California State University
Frances	Female	Latina	High	High	Graduate/Professional Degree	Graduate/Professional Degree	3.5–3.99	Large, selective, private university <sup>5</sup>
Lucas	Male	Asian American	Low	High	High School	College Degree	4.0 or higher	UC institution
Emma	Female	Latina	Medium	Low	College Degree	College Degree	3.5–3.99	Small religious university
Sean	Male	Multiracial <sup>2</sup>	Medium	Unknown	College Degree	College Degree	4.0 or higher	Large, selective, private university

Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Names are pseudonyms selected by the informants.

<sup>2</sup>Sean reported that he was African American and Native American.

<sup>3</sup>Education measured by highest degree completed on the following scale: 1 = Grade School, 2 = High School, 3 = Some College, 4 = College Degree, and 5 = Graduate/Professional Degree.

<sup>4</sup>High School grade point average was measured on the following scale: 1 = below a 1.0, 2 = 1.0–1.49, 3 = 1.5–1.99, 4 = 2.0–2.49, 5 = 2.5–2.99, 6 = 3.0–3.49, 7 = 3.5–3.99, 8 = 4.0 or above.

<sup>5</sup>Indicates an institution outside of California.

and universities, all nine students lived in campus housing during their first year at primarily residential 4-year colleges and universities. In other words, the current study is partially limited by the absence of students attending 2-year colleges and those who commute to school during their first year of college. While these limitations represent important areas of inquiry for future study, the students in the current study do share characteristics with the “43 percent of undergraduates [who] attend public or private not-for-profit four-year colleges and



universities” in the United States (American Council on Education, 2005, p.4), over 80 percent of whom plan to live in campus residence halls or other campus-sponsored housing (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Lindholm, Korn, & Mahoney, 2005).

From this design, the findings described here are intended to provide a broad base of understanding with respect to the relationships between precollege expectations, first-year experiences, and adjustment from which future analyses can further explore the impact of personal and institutional characteristics on the adjustment process of entering college students.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Because one of the aims of the study was to facilitate students’ open discussion of their personal precollege expectations and first-year experiences, individual interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection for this study. Twenty-six interviews were conducted over the course of one year (i.e., eight students at three time-points and one subject at two time-points) to address the research questions guiding this study. The first set of interviews took place during the spring term of students’ senior year of high school. The interview protocol for this initial meeting included semistructured, open-ended questions formulated to elicit responses regarding students’ personal, academic, and social expectations about college. Participants also completed a short questionnaire that collected demographic and background information after the interview.

In early and mid-December 2000 each member of the cohort of nine students participated in a follow-up interview that mirrored the format of the initial interview. Then again in May and June 2001, eight of the nine students agreed to participate in a third interview. The purpose of these follow-up interviews was to investigate how student expectations were met or not met during the first year of college and how this may have influenced their experiences, satisfaction with college, feelings of personal success, and adjustment during their freshman year. The timing of the second interview gave students the opportunity to share their initial reactions and experiences with college as compared with their precollege expectations, while the third interview allowed participants to reflect upon their expectations, college experi-

ences and performance, and adjustment throughout the entire first year of college.

Transcripts and interview notes from the 26 interviews served as the primary body of data for this study. The background/demographic survey data collected at the first round of interviews were another source of information for this research study. It is important to note that nearly all of the data in this study are self-reported and, therefore, subject to personal bias or selective memory. Students were informed at each meeting that all data would be kept confidential and they appeared to be very forthright and open in their responses, including accounts of mistakes or unfavorable events. However, it is likely that the participants were at least somewhat biased to represent themselves in a favorable light during our conversations.

The approach to data collection and analysis was inductive in nature; data were coded for key issues, recurring events, and common themes and ideas. Analysis of the data collected from the first round of interviews identified and categorized the nature and type of expectations that were expressed about college. Data analysis for the two follow-up interviews was grounded in the content, themes, and patterns of expectations identified in preliminary findings from the first interview. Further, the research questions and the body of literature on first-year student adjustment to college directed the codes and categories for the transcriptions of the follow-up interviews. This method of analysis was similar to the Constant Comparative Method outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). At every stage of data analysis, an Advisory Board comprised of three Higher Education faculty members and one professor of Public Health and Social Welfare at UCLA reviewed the emerging coding schemes and sample data to enhance the validity and reliability of the observations. In addition, the students themselves were provided summaries of findings from the interviews and were invited to provide corrections and feedback that were then incorporated into the process of data analysis.

## Findings and Discussion

First and foremost, it is important to note that the data gathered via longitudinal interviews with this cohort of students, particularly dur-

ing the initial interview, revealed that these students did maintain well developed expectations about the college experience. The depth and scope of their expectations may have differed, but all of the participants communicated that they had given most aspects of college at least some thought and had formulated ideas about what the experience would be like. This was supported in both their answers regarding different aspects of college and in response to a direct question about the degree to which they had considered these issues prior to the interview.

Beyond the fact that the students in the sample had expectations regarding the college experience, these data show that the students considered many similar aspects of college in their expectations. Not surprisingly two of the general topics that regularly arose in discussions regarding ideas, perceptions, and expectations of the college experience were academic life (e.g., coursework, studying, class schedules, and interactions with college faculty) and engagement in nonacademic activities such as informal socializing, partying, student organizations, and employment. However, beyond the somewhat predictable topics of academic and nonacademic college activities, interviewees shared a great deal about their expectations regarding more personal aspects of the college experience, most notably with respect to interpersonal relationships and their own individual development. While previous research has considered student expectations about academic and social (i.e., “nonacademic” in this research) experiences in college, these two rich new areas of students’ expectations about college have not been explored fully in the previous body of work on student expectations. As such, the current discussion of findings will focus on the themes and constructs relating to expectations of interpersonal relationships and personal development and first-year experiences in these areas.

### The First Interview: Great Expectations

When asked about their expectations of college, this group of high school students talked about interpersonal interactions and relationships a great deal. Some specific examples include studying with peers, “hanging out” in the residence halls, participating in a host of college student organizations that generally mirrored the types of activities in which they engaged in high school, and one of the most

highly expected college social activities: “partying.” However, beyond just what these students predicted they would be doing with their fellow college students, they discussed the interpersonal relationships that they felt would serve as the foundation of these social and academic experiences in college. They talked about changes in the state of their relationships with their family and high school friends as well as establishing new relationships with fellow college students. A few students looked forward to cultivating romantic relationships in college. However, all of them discussed the expectations that college was a premier time to meet new people and develop new friendships.

As with the majority of high school students across the country, going away to college represented the first time that these individuals would be living away from home. Therefore, it is not surprising that the nine students openly acknowledged the act of moving away as a significant point of transition in their current relationships with family and friends. Almost all of them said that their families would remain an important influence and source of support, but they expected that the physical and emotional separation of college would significantly change the dynamics of these relationships. For instance, Emma<sup>1</sup> said, “I think I might slack on visiting home a lot. It should be, but it won’t be, like, a top priority, because my top priority will be what’s there at school.”

With regard to their high school friends, students discussed the fact that they would no longer be in direct contact with these individuals. Students generally felt that the outcome of this decreased contact would be that the nature of these relationships would potentially shift in focus, fade, or even disappear completely, including Frances who said:

Well, a lot of the people who are my friends [*in high school*], I won’t talk to again. And then we’re all going to move away and it’s gonna be different. I mean I’m not gonna talk to them really ever. You know, not intentionally, but just I won’t be able to call them on the phone and I won’t see them for months at a time. So it’ll probably

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms selected by the informants.

be . . . way more distant. And the people I'm really close with now, I probably won't talk to them in, you know a year or two from now.

Discussions regarding the future of the familial and platonic relationships they relied upon for support in high school were characterized by emotions that ranged from nostalgic sadness to blunt matter-of-factness. However, the interviewees expressed a great deal of excitement about meeting new people in college and about the new perspectives and ideas that they could learn from them. Further, many of the high school students outlined a strategy to scale back their extracurricular commitments in college during the first year to allow themselves time to adjust to their new environment. In the anticipated absence of these formal commitments, interpersonal relationships and casual socializing were an even bigger focus of their social expectations for the first year of college. For the most part, participants discussed the establishment and maintenance of these new interpersonal relationships as a critical component of their educational experience. Most students also expected that friendships in college would be characterized by greater depth and maturity than their relationships with peers in high school. They felt that high school relationships are based on a more shallow foundation such as status, popularity, and appearances as reflected in the following comment by Mary:

Like in high school there's like a lot of money status, like who's richer, who's poorer. If you have the new shoes, if you have this. And . . . college . . . they might be a little bit concerned but not as much, because you're more out there for your education. High school is like a fashion show in a way and I don't think that's such a big deal in college.

In discussions regarding both interpersonal relationships and residential life issues, future roommates arose as an important relationship for the students during their adjustment to college. Whether the students anticipated a close friendship or a guarded coexistence (or were preparing themselves for either possibility), they acknowledged the profound role their future roommate would play in their daily college life. A few students even stressed the importance of future roommate(s) as an emotional resource in their lives, including Alexandra who stated that, "They're gonna probably take [*the*] part of my family; they're gonna be the substitute."

Overall, college was viewed as a time to forge new friendships and to potentially test the strength of friendships established prior to college. Students also anticipated less contact and support from their family and high school friends as they established meaningful relationships with fellow students in college.

In addition to their expectations with respect to interpersonal relationships in college, these students communicated a thoughtful consideration of issues related to personal growth and development and articulated clear ideas about how they wanted to change during college. Most notably, they expressed very explicit personal and professional goals that they were trying to achieve by attending college. These students discussed long-term plans and looked to college as an important step in their personal timeline in which to learn about themselves and to set their priorities. On the whole, they possessed a sense of agency and personal ambition with respect to the college experience.

The theme that came up with the greatest frequency under the topic of personal development was independence. Participants most often equated this with the physical separation from their families and “being on your own.” For example, in response to a question asking what he was most excited about when he thought about college, Lucas said, “Freedom—no curfews, at all. ‘Cause I have to ask my mom for permission for so many things. Just to go or something. Or tell her where I’m going. Freedom and independence.” Interestingly, these students discussed the notion of freedom and independence far more frequently within the context of personal choices and social relationships than in reference to their academic pursuits.

Students also expected that with this freedom came some responsibility. They discussed developing their own ideas and making their own choices. They viewed college as a time to grow up; to learn to act on their own behalf; and for their actions to represent their own best interests without the assistance of parents, siblings, or teachers. Alexandra articulated these views when she said,

Well, it’s supposed to be fun, right? You’re supposed to feel more free. And able to make your own choices, be more responsible. You’re gonna have to be less dependent on your family and

friends, because you're on your own now. And basically, like, trying to survive by yourself. It's the first stage when you'll be by yourself; it's the first stage of adulthood.

Participants also talked about college as a period of self-discovery and expected that this time would offer them the opportunity to explore different aspects of themselves and their environment as well as to see where they excel and what they enjoy both personally and academically. For example, they were enthusiastic about the prospect of *choosing* their coursework for the purposes of developing their individual interests and not having to spend time in classes that they don't enjoy or find personally relevant. These students had high expectations about courses related to their professional aspirations and were enthusiastic to engage in material related to their majors and future career paths. They also anticipated facing new social situations and people they had never dealt with before. For instance, while Jamie looked forward to college to expand her somewhat limited social experience, she expected some personal dilemmas that would be associated with this experience,

Taking a risk to go to a party, to see everyone doing all the things you've never seen before. Like smoking. I mean, I really don't want to smoke. So if my friends are smoking, what would I do? I mean right now I think that, "Oh no, I'm never going to do it." But in reality, what would I do? So maybe I might be challenged by that.

Several other students openly discussed the fact that they anticipated challenges and mistakes as a part of the process of learning and growing in college. For instance, Emma expected that at the end of the first year of college that she would feel,

a little bit frazzled from all that happens. Like kind of confused and adjusting. I think I'll have made a lot of mistakes because I'll have to get used to everything. I think in adjusting, you make mistakes. But I think, for the most part, I'll have learned some of my lessons.

In short, these students embraced the idea of college as a time of exploration and development. They appeared willing to undergo the

more challenging and uncertain aspects of personal growth in their struggles to gain greater independence, experience new things, and undergo the process of self-exploration and discovery.

### Follow-Up Interviews: The Reality of the Freshman Year

The two sets of follow-up interviews provided an opportunity to investigate many of the different ways that precollege expectations were met or not met during the first year of college. Further, it was possible to evaluate how students reacted to expectation fulfillment or disappointment and the subsequent effect it had on their process of adjustment to college. First-year experiences and expectation fulfillment or disillusionment are discussed within the framework established at the interviews with students as high school seniors, which included expectations and experiences that were both interpersonal and related to personal development.

#### *New People—New Worlds*

As anticipated, the interviewees were much less involved during their first year of college than they were in high school, joining few campus organizations or even none at all. Several reasons for this decrease in involvement between high school and college emerged from the follow-up interviews. Isabelle, an avid soccer player in high school, played intramural soccer her first year, but felt that she should “concentrate a little bit more on school first and see how it went before trying out” for the varsity team. While other students considered joining student clubs and groups in spite of the perceived academic demands of college, they were deterred by the financial and time requirements of campus organizations in college. Still other students found that since college offered a host of opportunities for becoming involved, they were hesitant to limit themselves to a specific few so early in college. Instead of formally committing to campus organizations, these nine students became engaged in the campus community in more informal ways such as attending general campus events, participating in residential life activities, and most importantly, socializing with newly established campus friends.

Students felt that their precollege expectations to forge friendships were fulfilled and even exceeded. They met people from various regions of the United States; different countries; and diverse racial,



ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The interviewees reported interacting with people who had different perspectives, political views, and personal lifestyles than their own and described this contact with fellow students as exciting, interesting, and broadening. As they expected, their relationships with others exposed them to so much more in college than was the case in their more protected high school environment. Frances' experience was similar to others,

Well, I met *so* many people. And there's [*sic*] a lot of people here that I *know* I never would have met. Going to a Catholic school almost all my life, it was weird because [*her university's*] got a lot of people who are Jewish. Like I never really thought that people weren't Catholic, let alone people weren't Christian. I mean I knew they were. I wasn't naïve, but I just never really knew anyone who was. And then, the high school that I went to was pretty racially diverse, but there were a lot people here [*in college*] that grew up in projects and, you know, there's a big gay population of people and stuff. Like things that I knew there were people like that but I never personally *knew* anyone like that. And now I do and that's really *cool*, because I was kind of sheltered.

The depth of first-year relationships also, ultimately, met students' expectations. However, cultivating meaningful friendships was a year-long process for most of these students. Proximity played a large role in students' relationships when they were first thrust into a new environment and in need of an immediate support group. As such, students often established relationships with roommates and neighbors on their floor during the first term. However, as the year progressed, students realized that proximity did not always yield the best relationships and they often continued their search for friends on other floors of their residence halls, in other residence halls, in classes, at student jobs, or, occasionally, in student organizations. By the end of the year, the students felt that, among all of the aspects of the transition from high school to college, they had been most successful at establishing a meaningful network of friends on campus.

Also as expected, students' relationships with their high school friends went through serious changes during the first year. As students established relationships with their peers in college, several lost touch with many of their friends from high school. Typically, students retained a

few of their closest friends from before college, but their contact with them was far less frequent than before, and the common ground of their interactions with their high school friends was typically topics outside of their respective college experiences.

First-year relationships with the students' families also underwent a transformation. While family interaction was reduced as the students expected, many students reported an unexpected development in their interactions with their parents: an evolution of their relationship beyond authoritarianism and toward being more egalitarian. Alexandra talked about how her parents more often treated her as a mature adult, and Lucas discussed how members of his family were opening up and appreciating each other more now that he had left. Emma, the only child of a single mother, shared the following reflections about how her relationship with her mother changed during her first year:

In high school, we always got along, but I kind of thought of her as [*the enforcer and*] resent[ed] her for being strict. And when I got to college, I mean, I got to know her as a person. I would find myself coming home [*i.e., the university residence hall*] and wanting to call her and tell her about my day just because I'd know she would have something to say about what she did when she was in college and what I should do.

An area of great disappointment for most students was their roommate situation. Students expected that roommates could serve as an important support system to them during their transition to college. However, in reality, roommates turned out to be one of the more challenging aspects of their first-year adjustment. Students typically described roommates as friends or friendly acquaintances at the first follow-up interview, but these relationships generally deteriorated over the remainder of the year. Issues with roommates ranged from fairly minor inconveniences such as different levels of cleanliness or establishing rules about guests and visitors (most often boyfriends and girlfriends) to more serious problems such as substance abuse, illness, and theft.

In short, the fact that relationships with roommates were among the greatest disappointments of the first year appeared to have a slightly

negative impact on students' feelings of overall satisfaction. However, the interviewees often established friendships with other students and more meaningful relationships with their families that helped them overcome the unfavorable effects of roommates with respect to their feelings of satisfaction with interpersonal relationships and overall adjustment to college.

### *Development and Growth*

During the interview with students as high school seniors, they discussed college as a critical time to explore and develop personally. They anticipated becoming more independent, learning more about themselves, and working toward personal and professional goals while they were in college. In general their experiences fulfilled these expectations.

In the follow-up interviews students revealed in the freedom and independence that college and living away from home afforded them. However, they were more likely to discuss independence within the framework of responsibility and making the right decisions for themselves rather than just about freedom from authority figures as they did during the first interview. Emma talked about what this responsibility meant to her and the surprising paradox that her experience with more independence created,

You make your own decisions and you're in charge of what happens to you now. You can't blame anyone else. I wanted to break away from rules and be able to do stuff myself. But it's so weird because now the parties that I did go to, I was back in [*my residence hall*] by 12 or 1 and that was my [*high school*] curfew. I haven't been doing *anything* bad! When it comes right down to it, I didn't have anything to break away from.

Unlike the first interview—when they were much more focused on social and interpersonal freedoms—students talked about independence with respect to the academic aspect of college. They repeatedly mentioned that college-level academics required much more self-discipline, initiative, and personal responsibility than their classes in high school did. Adjusting to enhanced freedom with respect to academics proved more difficult for them than managing their personal choices and independence in a social setting, especially in light of the fact that

they did not take full advantage of professors as an academic resource during their transition to college. Choosing courses, arranging a study schedule, meeting the demands of various classes, and motivating themselves to attend class were some of the specific challenges that the students discussed in the follow-up interviews. All in all, students felt that they made good choices, but that they could do better in the future. To them, learning to act responsibly and balancing social life and academics was an ongoing process of adjustment.

The aspect of personal development that truly fulfilled students' expectations was the issue of self-discovery and exploration. Many students went into college with specific goals to improve themselves in particular ways. For example, Jamie wanted to expand her social experiences, Jules and Sean hoped to overcome their shyness and become more extroverted, Emma wanted to commit to a romantic relationship, Lucas and Alexandra talked about becoming more responsible, Mary discussed being comfortable taking risks and learning to trust her peers, and Sean wanted to become more open and accepting of others. Students expected that the transition from high school to the large, diverse, and accepting atmosphere afforded by most collegiate institutions would facilitate these personal transformations.

Even though many of these goals entail major, long-term changes, these students felt that they made progress toward fulfilling their expectations for personal development during the first year of college. For instance, Sean learned to be more understanding of others and their personal choices. While previously he described himself as judgmental and would often hold a grudge, he made a conscious and successful effort to let go of his anger about his negative living situation and to forgive his roommates. Jules' first-year experiences provide another developmental "success story." Initially she clung to her roommate and her roommate's friends, but by the second semester she was comfortable enough to introduce herself to new people and establish relationships without the aid of others. In another example, Emma had a boyfriend during the first year as she had hoped, but she decided to end the relationship because she discovered that she enjoyed the freedom of being single after all.

One student's experience with personal development during the first year was especially significant. This individual decided to come out as

a homosexual during the first year of college. He had not openly expressed this expectation at the first interview, but later said that he had anticipated that college would allow him to be open about this aspect of his identity. The student said that the diversity of people and their views in college and the support system of the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender (GLBT) student organization proved to be critical in his process of coming out during the first year of college.

According to students who were interviewed, expectations regarding personal growth were unique in their influence on first-year experiences. While the impact of expectations for academic aspects of college, nonacademic involvement, and interpersonal relationships was more preparatory in nature (i.e., formulating expectations allowed students to consider alternatives and get ready for various first-year experiences), expectations about personal development inspired students to action. These expectations for personal development could be construed as goals and seemed to elicit a great deal of commitment from students. Commitment to these goals, coupled with the expectation that college would allow them the freedom and accepting environment to attempt personal transitions, motivated students to achieve and fulfill their expectations during the first year of college.

### *Feelings of Adjustment*

Despite some unmet expectations and personally challenging experiences, it is important to note that all of these students felt well adjusted to college overall. Specific reasons for this assessment were intimately related to the fulfillment of their expectations for interpersonal relationships and personal development, including the fact that they had established a network of close friends, that they had met their expectations to become more independent and responsible, and that they had fun during their first year. Students were asked about four specific areas of adjustment at both follow-up interviews. More specifically, they were asked to discuss and rate their feelings of personal success at: understanding what was expected of them academically, establishing a network of friends on campus, adjusting to the academic demands of college, and establishing meaningful connections with faculty. Almost all of the students reported feeling most successful establishing a network of friends and least successful at interacting with faculty. Ratings for both areas of academic adjustment fell between the other two items in terms of students' feelings of success.

Therefore, it appears that a student can experience expectation disillusionment in specific areas of their first-year experience (e.g., difficult experiences with roommates, fewer opportunities to “party” in college) and still feel personally successful and satisfied with the college experience overall. Based on student feedback during the follow-up interviews, it appears that the support of close friends and progression in one’s own goals for personal development are particularly important to students’ well-being and adjustment during the first-year experience. In other words, feeling successful in these aspects of collegiate life are critical to feelings of adjustment and success during the transition from high school to college.

## Implications for Research and Practice

The results of this research have important methodological, practical, and theoretical implications for higher education in general—and to the first-year experience in particular—which help broaden our current understanding of student expectations about college, provide meaningful feedback to faculty and staff at the high school and college levels, and inform future research in this area.

From a methodological perspective, the use of student interviews in the current research provided valuable new information on the nature and content of student expectations about college. This method of inquiry opened up two rich new areas of students’ expectations about college—those related to interpersonal relationships and personal development—that have not been explored fully in previous research, which tended to focus more on student expectations about academic and social experiences in college. Additionally, qualitative methodology allowed for an in-depth exploration of these types of expectations about college and their relationship with adjustment and success during the first year. As such, future research on student expectations would benefit from a mixed methodological design in which interviews, focus groups, or open-ended items could provide additional data to consider along with quantitative measures. Such qualitative methodologies can be used as a means of identifying new themes and items to include on survey instruments or as a way to further investigate and “flesh out” the results of quantitative inquiry. Finally, future research on student expectations about college using qualitative

approaches would be even more useful with a larger and more diverse student sample to potentially validate and expand upon the findings of the current study.

In addition to providing support for the use of a new methodology to address the topic of students' expectations about college, the current study shows that student expectations represents valuable feedback for practitioners at the high school and college levels. Findings about the nature of students' expectations could inform how high school seniors are advised about the college choice process in order to guide them towards college environments that maximize the potential to meet their expectations regarding their relationships with peers, family, faculty, and staff as well as their personal and career goals in addition to those related to their academic qualifications and interests. Further, the efforts of college recruitment and outreach programs to complement this work among high school counselors by providing realistic information about the college with respect to students' personal development, interpersonal interactions, and academic experiences in college and at the particular institution could also help students form appropriate expectations and adequately prepare them for these demands. By considering the "whole" student and discussing the interpersonal and developmental aspects of the college experience in their own right and in connection with students' academic and cocurricular expectations, staff in the high schools and at college can help support and prepare transitioning students for a successful first year of college.

The precollege expectations and college experiences of students in the current study also provide valuable feedback about how first-year college services could be programmed, marketed, and delivered on campus in an effort to ease the adjustment process for new students. For example, these findings show that any consideration of college student involvement *must* allow for informal channels of engagement with the campus as students may decide to forgo formal involvement in student organizations until they feel that they have adjusted to the academic and personal demands of college overall. As such, these findings suggest particular ways for institutions to reach their first-year students. Membership in formal organizations may not be the best way to engage the first-year population in the campus community and may not properly gauge student involvement during the first year. Instead,

if they wish to reach their first-year student population, campus personnel may find it more useful to maximize the impact of the community that seems to form naturally around residence halls, courses, and majors.

In another example, the findings from this study indicate that students' interpersonal relationships with their roommates represent one of the bigger challenges during the first year. Since many of the students in the current study felt that roommates would serve as a primary source of personal support during the first year, these roommate experiences represented the most prominent area of expectation disillusionment. The specific experiences of these nine students during the course of their first year of college suggest that they, and perhaps others like them, could particularly benefit from an extensive orientation to their new shared living situation, including how to establish "ground rules" and fostering communication skills with roommates. However, since these interviews indicate that roommate issues tend to intensify later in the year, it is important to provide continued training for conflict management and communication skills throughout the first year.

The expectations and experiences of the students included in the current study also provide insight into how to *structure* student support programs. For example, these students had very high expectations to meet new people as well as to engage in particular areas of study related to their personal and professional interests. As such, it may be best for colleges and universities to draw upon new students' excitement about forging new relationships by establishing peer-mentoring programs; employing experienced college students in as many aspects of the orientation program, welcome week, and first-year residential life activities as possible; and even using undergraduates in their second year and beyond to help teach first-year seminars and other introductory curricula. A network of peers who are approachable as equals but are slightly more experienced and informed than fellow first-year students may prove to be a less intimidating resource for new students than faculty or professional staff. Further, the peer relationships that may develop from these initial interactions may help new students fulfill an important expectation of the college experience: to meet new people and establish a new network of friends. Similarly, getting students engaged in courses and programs in their major, in a discipline



related to their professional interests, or with cocurricular programming related to their intended career path (e.g., student preprofessional clubs or career center programs) at the beginning can help provide a community of support for new students. While new students themselves often fill their course schedules with general education courses to get them “out of the way,” encouragement from an advisor or orientation counselor to become involved in coursework and student programming that is more personally and professionally meaningful to the new student can help ease their transition and fulfill another of their most significant expectations: to participate in coursework that is personally meaningful and related to their intended career paths.

Finally, the results of this study have theoretical implications. Most notably, they indicate that unmet expectations do not always lead to negative outcomes for first-year students, which is an important departure from previous research on the “Freshman Myth.” In fact, these results suggest that *not* fulfilling certain expectations may actually enhance adjustment to college in other areas. For instance, these results suggest that postponing the fulfillment of the expectation to participate in student organizations may actually serve to *enhance* adjustment to college during the first year. Along the same vein, initial disappointment among certain students about college partying actually led some to discover more meaningful opportunities for socializing and campus involvement. In yet another example, it appears that initial challenges with respect to establishing a network of friends on campus, a very important expectation for first-year students, appear to be a common first-year experience and may actually lead to more significant interpersonal relationships by the end of the first year.

While previous research on student expectancies indicated that the disillusionment of precollege student expectations is correlated with less adaptive behaviors and a more accurate image of college is associated with positive student outcomes, the current study suggests that this relationship is multilayered and sometimes even paradoxical. In order to understand fully the relationship between precollege expectations, first-year experiences, and adjustment to college, both researchers and practitioners must first expand the topics and focus they consider as part of student expectations to include those that are personal and interpersonal in nature as well as academic and social.

Further, they must consider the association and impact of expectations, both those that are met and unmet, with a wider range of first-year outcomes including academic achievement, commitment to one's major and career, relationships with family and friends, positive interaction with faculty, adjusting to the academic demands of college, campus involvement (both formal and informal), and overall feelings of satisfaction and personal success. Only then will we be able to determine whether the behavioral correlates of expectation disillusionment are an albatross for first-year students or a natural part of cognitive and affective development in the transition from high school to college.

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