

The academy's middle child, the sophomore, is beginning to earn the kind of attention that has been trained on first-year students for the past several decades. Molly Schaller shares insights on the stages she has found to exist in the sophomore year, arguably the rockiest of them all.

WANDERING AND WONDERING:
**Traversing the Uneven Terrain of
the Second College Year**

BY MOLLY A. SCHALLER

*"I'm just kind of lost . . . as far as my friends, that's all changing, my relationships with other people are changing, my family life is changing, my major's changed like five times."
—Melissa, twenty-year-old sophomore*

I SAT IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM as a large group of faculty and staff from across campus gathered to discuss academic excellence. We had just engaged in small-group discussions and were sharing our results. The topic at the moment was what we want entering sophomores to be able to do. One faculty member expressed her concerns: "By the end of the first year, they should really know why they want to be here and what they're aiming for. They ought to have a major by the time they start the sophomore year. I know some students who don't, and I feel like they're kind of lost souls. Academically, we're set up that they really are behind significantly in their majors if they're just deciding on their majors by the

end of the sophomore year." This was a sentiment that I had heard many times from faculty and administrators across the country. Is this a reasonable expectation for traditional-age sophomores? What do we know about sophomores, and how can we design campus environments and our interactions with them in ways that optimize their learning?

Institutions across the country have designed and implemented first-year experience programs that have gone a long way toward affecting student success. Retention rates have increased at some institutions as a result of these interventions, and first-year students often get the support they need to negotiate the transition into college. Now many educators are wondering how students fare in the second year of college, what their needs are, and what responsibilities we have in designing environments to meet those needs. These are questions that I have been pondering for years, and other professionals across the country are grappling with them as well.

At present, there are few truly comprehensive programs for sophomore students. There are residential, academic, career, and campus ministry programs for sophomore students at several institutions. Colgate University has one of the most comprehensive programs for college sophomores. Its Sophomore Year Experience is year two of a progressive program that focuses on citizenship education and highlights development of class community, academic enrichment opportunities, mentorship from faculty and alumni, and career exploration. Colgate has devoted significant resources to this program, including hiring a dean of the Sophomore Year Experience and redesigning living opportunities in order to group sophomores together as they focus on learning the arts of democracy.

Institutions that wish to attend to sophomore students in new ways need to ground their programs in an understanding of the challenges of the sophomore year. In my own work with sophomores, I have often felt inadequate, as if I were missing what they need. In the course of my research into the second-year experience, I have found that sophomores are at an important developmental point, one that has implications for our environments, programs, and approaches to learning.

In my effort to make sense of the sophomore year, I listened to nineteen traditional-age sophomores at a midsize, private Catholic university as they described their second-year experience in focus groups or individual interviews. Eleven of the students were women, and seventeen were Caucasian. They were selecting majors in a variety of academic fields: one each in American studies, art, mechanical engineering, political science, psychology and sociology, special education, communication, and biology/pre-medicine; two in English; three in business; and four in education.

I discovered that these students existed in or moved through four stages in three aspects of their lives. The four stages are random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choices, and commitment. Although I asked questions about spirituality, campus involvement, and home life, most of what students wanted to share pertained to three issues: how they viewed themselves, their relationships, and their academic experiences and decisions. Most of the students were in the focused exploration or tentative choices stage of their experience with each of the three issues; some were still in random exploration of an issue or were moving into commitment on one or more of the issues. What follows is a description of each of the stages and their implications for the design of learning environments.

RANDOM EXPLORATION

FOR MANY of the students in the study, the first year of college had been a time of random exploration. They had moved through the college experience with a sense of exuberance. The change in environment and responsibilities meant that the students had been experiencing themselves and their world in new ways. They described decisions they had made in their first year as lacking self-reflection. While most of the sophomores had moved out of this stage by the end of their first year of college or by the end of the summer between the two years, some remained in this stage in one or more areas of their lives.

Emily (all names in this article are pseudonyms), a transfer student who was experiencing the university much as a first-year student would, exhibited this lack of reflection: "I don't know how many times I've said I'm going to study tonight and then the next thing I know I'm like in a house with a million people in it." For Emily, motivators for this behavior were mostly other people encouraging her to go out or attend a party.

Sophomore students in random exploration seemed very aware of the choices pending in their lives, especially in regard to majors and careers. However, they made choices that allowed them to delay deciding until later. For Emily, that meant selecting a major that would allow her to specialize or focus her life later. She said, "I'm just glad I'm in a broad major because I don't know specifically what I want to do." Because students in random exploration do not yet seem to be in touch with an internal voice or in active reflection about decisions, their movement through the college experience can seem undirected.

FOCUSED EXPLORATION

RANDOM EXPLORATION did not end abruptly for the students in this study. Students described periods of growing awareness about their choices and their world. Many of the students made the transition from random exploration to the next stage, focused exploration, over the summer between their first and second years or early in the sophomore year. Therefore, most of the sophomores in this study were in focused exploration in one or more areas of their lives. In focused exploration, students began to express a level of frustration with their current relationships, with themselves, or with their academic experience. They began to question the choices they had made during random exploration and wondered out loud about the mistakes they had made. Compli-

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cating matters for many was the pressure they felt to select a major, to have a sense of a future career and life direction.

Rob selected American studies as his major so that he could “take classes that I just enjoy and learn while I was here.” While this worked for Rob at the beginning of the sophomore year, by the middle of the year, he was feeling pressure to get something else out of his college experience. Rob was becoming increasingly concerned about his future. Describing his frustration, he said, “American Studies, I have no idea where I’m going with it. . . . I have no idea what I’m going to do when I get out of college.” Rob soon lost enthusiasm for classes because he could not attach his enjoyment of the course topics to his future security. His grades fell, and he found himself losing concentration on his schoolwork.

As focused exploration took hold, many of the participants began to experience the challenge of the sophomore year. Dan, a political science major, described the year by saying, “I think being a sophomore is more—you see both sides. I think it’s almost like a turning point in a way. . . . It’s like you’re standing on a fence.” Dan’s metaphor for standing on a fence fit what others in the study described: Sophomores look backward and see their first year of college and their childhood, and they look forward and see the rest of their college career and their future.

Although Rob was overwhelmed by thoughts of his future, he was enjoying the opportunity to generally reflect on life. He said, “I’m much happier this year, I’d say. I like who I am. I’m working on getting to know myself better, though. That’s pretty much what’s impor-

tant to me now.” Others were facing periods of crisis, with exploration of themselves, relationships, and the future at the center of their lives. Melissa, an elementary education major, was experiencing great frustration with her major and decisions about her future. She described the pressure she felt to decide on a major as she walked in the door and blamed the university for encouraging students to make early decisions about their majors. At the end of her sophomore year, Melissa was uncertain and experiencing constant worry. She said she was feeling stressed. When I asked her to describe it, she said, “The stress that I’m talking about is more like, what I’m going to do for the rest of my life, where am I going?”

The longer a student remained in focused exploration, the more comprehensive their exploration became. Some students moved through focused exploration more quickly than others, often seizing on an answer about themselves, their relationships, or their academics that seemed to fit well enough. The students who took on focused exploration more fully seemed to look at their lives more thoroughly. This is the dilemma of the sophomore year. If we want our students to understand themselves and begin the process of becoming self-directed, should they stay in this stage for longer periods of time or in deeper ways? If we believe so, we can anticipate that students will need support as they move through this process. If students don’t stay in this stage for long enough or in deep ways, then they may resort to allowing powerful external forces such as parents, peers, faculty, society at large, or old notions of themselves to make decisions for them (see Matt Sheahan’s story in “Too Sure Too Soon: When Choosing Should Wait” in the May-June 2004 issue of *About Campus*).

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TENTATIVE CHOICES

MANY OF THE SOPHOMORES in this study began to make choices during the sophomore year that would set the direction for the remainder of their college career. Making

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these choices, even tentatively, moved students out of focused exploration and into the next stage, tentative choices. Jenna was one of the students who had changed her major multiple times, from psychology to English to a triple major, before she chose education. Jenna described the choice: "I love it so much more now that I know what I'm getting into, and it kind of makes it worthwhile. I know what I'm getting into, and it makes it easier to go to classes, more rewarding now." The decision-making process was challenging for Jenna, but when she stepped into the high school classroom to begin observations, she felt relief that her selection seemed to fit.

Students in the tentative choices stage described a new level of responsibility that came with seeing their future more clearly. Lauren, a psychology and sociology major, had a difficult sophomore year. She described her new sense of responsibility: "I pretty much know what I want out of my future, so I'm figuring out what to do to get there, and I don't mind doing things myself. I'm more independent, more future-oriented, too, more responsible too. Last year, it was just a year to have fun and stuff. This year, it's more like—'settle down, you know your limits on things, and what you have to do to get certain grades.'"

While tentative choices must be made, it is the process of how they are made that seems most important for sophomores. If sophomores examine the options fully, engage thoroughly in focused exploration, and make decisions based on internal connections to the exploration period, then their choices may be more aligned to personal values.

COMMITMENT

FEW OF THE SOPHOMORES in this study were able to move through the lingering anxiety of tentative choices to make confident decisions about their future. Those who could do so moved to commitment. In commitment, students spoke differently than others about their year. They were already

planning for the future, clear about what they wanted, and unwavering in their sense of responsibility for their own future. Akash, a business major, found that the approaches faculty took with him were helping him to take on more responsibility for his own education. He reported, "Instead of teachers teaching you, you have to learn it on your own now; they're just kind of there to guide you. It's like the teaching aspect is done. It's about the work ethic now." Akash carefully planned his classes, service work, and friendships because he wanted a secure future. He described his friends as the people who, in twenty years, he would call his "college buddies."

Amy, a photography major, also had made firm commitments to her future and her major. She had experienced constant criticism from faculty, which peaked at her sophomore review. Knowing that she would be limited in her future career, she said, "I'm like growing up and I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do with my life, because being an art major, the possibilities are not grandiose. So, it's like being comfortable with that and accepting that, OK, I might be a waitress for the next five years and I still can be happy; I don't need money as long as I'm happy."

Students in commitment in one or more areas of their life did not doubt their decisions as did sophomores in the tentative choices stage. Instead, they were either resolute in their choices or they felt such relief in making a choice that they ignored their other options. This is an important distinction. Sophomores who make choices while in denial of other options may, in fact, end up revisiting those same alternatives as they age.

PUTTING THE SOPHOMORE YEAR IN CONTEXT

WHILE THE SOPHOMORE YEAR is a unique experience, it fits into the larger context of becoming an adult. The students I talked with were keenly aware of the responsi-

bility that loomed after college. Many of them actually talked about the impact that turning twenty had on their view of themselves as adults. Robert Kegan, in his book *In Over Our Heads*, puts the experience of the sophomore year in this context of becoming an adult. He describes adolescence as an egocentric period. In this period, individuals' decision-making processes, like those of the students in random exploration, are often driven by impulses. Being in random exploration also seems related to Marcia Baxter Magolda's finding in her book *Knowing and Reasoning in College* that most of the first-year students and about half of the sophomore students in her study employed what she calls *absolute knowing*. For these students, authority figures are responsible for determining what is true and then for providing that information to students. Because students in random exploration do not yet seem to be in touch with an internal voice or in active reflection about decisions, they may feel uncertain about what they should be doing if they are not receiving direction from others. These students may be following the direction of authority or acting impulsively.

In moving beyond adolescence, individuals develop a psychological life that includes the tools to make choices and respond to the expectations of others in relationships, Kegan notes. Similarly, Baxter Magolda's findings suggest that nearly half of the sophomore students in her study were in the stage she calls *transitional knowing*. For these students, truly understanding what is happening in the classroom and in life becomes important. This parallels the sophomores' experience of focused exploration, when they seek meaning and direction in life.

While the sophomores in this study seemed to match Kegan's and Baxter Magolda's descriptions, remaining transitional knowers will not help students meet the demands of adult life. When students are forced to make decisions regarding their major, they may still be responding to the expectations of others instead of making decisions based on a self-constructed voice. In her book *Making Their Own Way*, Baxter Magolda chronicles the importance of self-authorship as central to adult decision making. She also points out that most of the college graduates in her study did not become capable of directing their own choices until well after college. If we recognize this as an important developmental leap, then we have the responsibility to design learning environments that assist in the process rather than leave it to chance. In designing environments to encourage student learning, our challenge is to provide a context in which students can move toward self-authorship.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

ROBERT BARR and John Tagg's 1995 article on moving from a teaching to a learning paradigm sparked a decade-long conversation about the design of learning environments. The American Association for Higher Education recently published a set of key characteristics of learning-centered institutions that was written by Kay McClenney. One of the six important characteristics is that students "participate in a diverse array of engaging learning experiences aligned with required outcomes and designed in accord with good educational practice." In designing learning environments for sophomore students, we can borrow from McClenney's suggestions for ways to engage students, including expecting students to be responsible for their learning, using active and collaborative learning experiences, and working with students to design individual learning plans.

Sophomores need encouragement to take on responsibility for their learning. To optimize learning, we can design environments to guide sophomores in ongoing, structured exploration of the world and of themselves. Sophomores can be taught to engage in self-reflection and then be required to do so in curricular and cocurricular activities. All of these things require intentional planning by educators.

The key goal for students in random exploration is for them to become fully engaged in the learning process. In turn, the key goal for students in focused exploration is for them to connect with their inner voice, to acknowledge external pressures, and to make decisions about the future that are rooted in a thorough exploration process. If students engage in these processes, the tentative choices and commitments they make will be solid foundations for their lives.

Designing Optimal Learning Environments for Sophomores in Random Exploration. Random exploration plays an important role in students' lives. It is one way to get to know themselves and the world. However, because students in this stage do not engage in reflection, their experiences are not sorted through, categorized, or judged. In random exploration, students may make the same mistakes repeatedly. By taking the following actions, we can help students start to reflect on and learn from their mistakes.

- *Give students the responsibility for learning.* The main barrier to learning for students in random exploration is that they tend to relinquish responsibility for learning. If a student's mother suggests a major, a professor suggests a topic for a paper, or an adviser suggests a class, the student may not engage in a thorough decision-making process about that choice. For example, Lauren,

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whom I described earlier as being in the tentative choices stage in regard to her major, was majoring in psychology and sociology but wanted to add a minor in criminal justice. Her father and her academic adviser said that a minor “wasn’t worth it,” so she did not add one. She described her father as being very involved in her academic life, to the extent that he even chose which sections of courses she should take and color-coded her daily schedule for her.

As Lauren’s story about not taking on a minor illustrates, students may acquiesce to appease others or because they think that others know more than they do about an issue. While there are cases when this is accurate, for students, learning requires engagement in the process. Active learning suggests not simply an external activity but an internal process. The challenge for educators both inside and outside of the classroom is to design experiences that provide students with opportunities to explore the world and then to place responsibility for the decision making on the student. Random exploration occurs when many students are experiencing large, impersonal lecture classes and may not be required to struggle with course topics. Students in random exploration should be encouraged to examine their rationales for decisions.

• *Require reflection.* The sophomores in focused exploration said that “getting to know myself” was a central task of their sophomore year. They should receive help with this task. While reflection is an important tool in this process, for those in random exploration, reflection can be superficial. Emily, the transfer student, exhibited a lack of depth in her reflection during a discussion about drinking alcohol and attending parties. She said, “I tend to have more fun a lot of times when everyone is drinking, because I think it’s more interesting. Things happen, and I think it’s funny the next morning to tell about it.” Emily knew that her friends were not this casual about drinking and partying. She said, “I can see where next year I’ll be like, ‘OK, well, whatever’ and not have so much priority on it [partying].” In our relationships with students, we can

ask probing questions for students to answer, not for us but for themselves. Emily might have been able to make a connection between being hurt or having difficulties in school because of alcohol use or abuse had someone in her life been asking her probing questions about her social life. Building these connections for Emily may have helped her to begin to evaluate her own choices. In teaching students how to reflect, we can help them in their process of self-exploration.

Often, I’ve found that sophomores who have violated university policy may not be able to determine why they engaged in a particular behavior. For these students, the use of process maps or other techniques to identify influences on their behavior may assist them in beginning the reflection process. In using a process map, students are asked to examine what happened right before they engaged in a behavior and move backward through an entire event. Students can then be encouraged to identify choices they made and influences on those choices. As students learn to reflect deeply on their choices, they will move toward focused exploration.

• *Expect new relationship building.* Students in focused exploration often described the relationships they had during random exploration as superficial, harmful, or not of their own choosing. Rob, whom I described earlier as being in focused exploration in his academic life, began to question the type of friendships he was in during the second semester of his first year. He said, “I realized it was more like we had just a mutual wanting to get real messed up.” He recognized that his friends had not been good for him, saying, “They didn’t understand me, and at the same time, I couldn’t understand why they’d do the things they’d do.” A key for Rob was that he had other friendship options, and developing healthy friendships helped him determine what was not healthy.

While we know that peer influences can be destructive, we also know that relationships with parents and other authority figures can be stifling. Students in random exploration may benefit from learning to examine the pressures in their relationships, the benefits, and the drawbacks.

As a first step, we can encourage new relationship building during the sophomore year. Melissa, who described herself at the opening of this article as being in the midst of an all-encompassing life change, said, "It's just hard to meet new people, because people are so closed off and it's just hard to get acquainted. Freshman year, everybody was all about meeting new people, but once you find your set group, it's kind of like you were stuck to it for this year." To support students in their ongoing search for healthy relationships, we can encourage students to join new organizations, work in new small groups, or do whatever it takes to expand their friendships and to see relationships as choices.

In our relationships with sophomores, we might consider how we respond to their problems, being careful not to give students the answer to every problem they face. A learning-centered approach that requires students to select topics for papers, evaluate their own and classmates' assignments, and come to class prepared to participate in rich conversation can keep sophomores from stagnating in random exploration.

We want students in random exploration to engage in appropriate and healthy searching as they move toward more active decision making about themselves, their relationships, and academics. Faculty and student affairs professionals can work together to identify students who are not engaged in the exploration process and provide them with individual support for becoming engaged.

Designing Optimal Learning Environments for Students in Focused Exploration. Focused exploration can and should be a period of deep personal reflection about life and the future. Students who move through this stage quickly or with ease may not have truly connected with or begun to develop a resourceful inner voice. Students engaging in this process would benefit from support and encouragement to remain genuinely in the search.

- *Provide opportunities for exploration.* Study abroad, service learning, cooperative learning experiences, internships, and opportunities to conduct observations outside of school provide students with the chance to meaningfully explore the world around them. Engaging

students in exploration of their world is important in many stages of education. During the first-year experience, students are exploring the new world of college life, but this is just a starting place for the ongoing exploration that needs to occur to prepare students to make internally guided choices about their future.

Dan's story illustrates the importance of meaningful exploration. Prior to coming to college, Dan said, he had "a negative view of college." He felt that college was an expectation others had for him and one that he could not avoid. During his first year of college, he wasn't certain how to make the experience his own. In the summer between his first year and his sophomore year, Dan participated in a study program in India. He said, "I went to India, and that just really made me aware of international things, which I have always been interested in, so I changed to political science, which I know now is what I want." Dan's excitement translated to his experience in the classroom. He said, "I love going to classes. It's kind of neat to get excited over why you're paying so much money and energy to go here." Dan said that during his first year, he was so focused on getting good grades that he forgot about what he was learning. As a sophomore, he said, "My top concern, for me, is to learn more."

Pre-professional programs can easily build clinical, internship, cooperative learning experiences, and observation components into courses during the sophomore year. In liberal arts majors, this may not be as easy and, in fact, may be contrary to the liberal arts philosophy. Not all degrees prepare students directly for a profession. In this case, programs can be designed to encourage students' active exploration of the world, their belief system, and their future. Coursework can include field experience. For example, sociology students can study world issues in the surrounding community. History students can connect their studies to local and institutional history. Chemistry students can conduct research projects to study the natural world, perhaps with senior or graduate students. Intensive service experiences or study abroad can accomplish the same goal, as Dan's story illustrates. Regardless of the academic major that is involved, faculty and advisers can look for ways to help

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sophomores make connections through application of their learning.

During the sophomore year, students who are overwhelmed with focused exploration may drop out of the cocurricular experience. When I asked Nina, an honors psychology student, to describe her year, she said, “I don’t like the person I have been. It’s definitely the more stressful of my two years. It’s been the more confusing of the two years also, which is kind of surprising, ’cause I was very confused last year, but I’ve had a lot more doubts this year and stuff. I think because my stress level has been much higher, and I’ve doubted myself being able to handle everything that I faced this year, and how much I’ve procrastinated. I’ve been down on myself, and saying that I’m not good enough, and stuff like that.” Nina hoped for better in her junior year. She said she would look for new friends, join new organizations, and have more fun, but not until next year. Educators, particularly student affairs professionals, may be able to identify sophomores like Nina and find ways to provide them with necessary support.

- *Structure reflection.* One key source of information for sophomore students in the focused exploration stage is themselves. Rob, Dan, and many of the other sophomores in this study described actively looking for “self.” It is important to help students involved in this process to listen to and value their own perspectives about choices they might make. For sophomore students, a key is the ability to identify external pressures and internal desires. Students may benefit from examining what they believe others expect of them as they become more in tune with their own interests, abilities, and desires.

Faculty can encourage self-reflection through assignments in which students are asked to establish learning goals, examine their contribution to the learning of classmates, or take on the perspective of another, or through approaches in which students are required to think through the learning process. This type of reflection is a key component of internship programs, service learning activities, and study abroad.

- *Provide support.* It is tempting to want to save or protect students. When students seem challenged, professionals may be tempted to answer their questions, direct them in their process, or resolve their problems;

however, these approaches may not be the most appropriate for students. Melissa described the complex questions she was facing as a sophomore: “What I’m going to do with the rest of my life, where I am going, and like who I associate with.” The institutional community should be prepared to keep students engaged in this process long enough to hear their own voice. We may see peaks in counseling center visits during the sophomore year. Negotiating these life questions can be quite challenging. If we are going to encourage focused exploration, we may need to provide students with additional support to help them negotiate the expectations held by others in their lives.

“THE YEAR YOU MAKE IT YOUR OWN”

I HAVE BEGUN TO ENCOURAGE educators to label the sophomore year in ways that encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. This can be the year in college when students determine their own direction, actively select their friends, identify what they want for their future, and begin to take ownership of their own learning experience. This will happen more broadly if educators take responsibility for carefully designing the sophomore-year experience.

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