

Negotiating the freshman year: Challenges and strategies among first-year college students.

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Marcia Roe Clark

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### Abstract

This study explores the concept of strategies as a means for understanding how students negotiate the transition to college. Based upon a qualitative study of eight first-year students at an urban, commuter, public four-year college, it explores how students experienced challenges, perceived influences, and devised strategies during the freshman year. Findings revealed that challenges and influences ranged from negative to positive, and occurred both inside and outside the institution. Implications for first-year seminars and further research are discussed.

# Negotiating the Freshman Year: Challenges and Strategies Among First-Year College Students

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Success for college freshmen is often defined in terms of making the transition to the college student role. Sociology-based theories identify multiple factors, both inside and outside of college, that may influence that process such as: students' initial goals and commitments; their collegiate experiences, including their academic performance, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty, staff, and peer groups; their relationships with people and communities outside the college community, including parents, peers, employers, and community organizations; and their personal attributes and characteristics (Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989). While the theories effectively capture the range of factors influencing students' transitions, they fall short in addressing how students experience, perceive, and subsequently manage those various and varying influences. The question

remains: How do first-year students negotiate the transition to college?

This question has received some important attention among scholars (Attinasi, 1989; Padilla, Treviño, Treviño, & Gonzalez, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1994), with the concept of strategies emerging as an important theme. Strategy is useful for considering freshman transitions because it recognizes the part that students play in managing their experiences and actions in college. Because sociological theories propose that situations occurring outside of the institution also influence students' transitions to college, it is reasonable to suggest that managing those external experiences may similarly require students to devise strategies. A complete understanding of freshman transitions, therefore, must accommodate both internal and external contexts and strategies.

The purpose of this study is to explore and expand the concept of strategies as a means for gaining a deeper understanding of how students negotiate the transition to college. By following students' experiences during their first year, this study will explore the dynamics of strategies among college freshmen by looking at the kinds of challenges, both inside and outside of college, that prompt students to strategize during that important time and the circumstances that appear to influence them in that process. Implications for enhancing institutional practice to foster successful

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*Marcia Roe Clark is Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy at The University at Buffalo, State University of New York.*



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