

Extended abstract of the doctoral dissertation

**Compartmentalized cultures, integrated transitions: Exploring first-year student transition
through institutional culture at a middle Atlantic university**

by

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NODA—Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education

This qualitative research study explores how first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture in higher education during the transition from high school to college. Examining institutional culture during the first year remains relevant because nearly 25% of all students who depart higher education do so within their first year (Nalbone et al., 2015). When disaggregated, there are problematic differences among these departures based on students' gender, race, and first-generation status (Pell, 2015). Institutional culture serves as a timely tool to account for variation in first-year students' transitional experiences. Particularly, institutional culture provides an analytic device through which to add sophistication and complexity in understanding the experiences of students during their first year of college.

This qualitative study employs cultural constructivist methodology informed by a constructivist theoretical perspective to illuminate tacit cultural assumptions that function as complex processes that students encounter, navigate, and experience (Guido et al., 2010; Kuh, 2000; Schein, 2010; Whitt, 1993) as they learn to perform and enact peer norms within an

institutional culture. Cultural constructivism provides a methodological approach that appreciates and accounts for the multiple realities of various stakeholders.

The sample for this research study includes 62 students who completed their first year at Middle Atlantic University (MAU). Qualitative one-on-one interviews following a semi-structured interview protocol served as the data collection technique for this study. The semi-structured nature of the interview protocol included open-ended questions that allowed participants to reconstruct and analyze that which was salient to their transitional experiences. To obtain experiential variation, the sample was stratified by oversampling for gender, race, and first-generation status (see below table for participant demographics).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	24	39.4%
Female	37	60.4%
Genderqueer	1	0.2%
Race		
Asian	10	16%
Biracial	2	3%
Black	13	21%
Latinx	2	3%
White	35	56%
College Year		
1	50	81%
2	12	19%
Status		
First-Generation	7	11%
Not First-Generation	55	89%

Intentionally including and representing the narratives of students based on their gender, race, and first-generation status allows for the continued understanding of the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, a need in current higher education research (Fischer, 2007; Perna & Thomas,

2008; Stuber, 2011). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following interpretative thematic analysis.

This study is guided by the following primary research question: *How do first-year students experience, perceive, and make sense of institutional culture during their transition to higher education?*

Several secondary research questions further shape this study:

- (a) *How do students learn to enact institutional culture during their transition?*
- (b) *How do campus friendships influence perceptions of institutional culture?*
- (c) *How do students ascribe affective meaning to institutional rituals and situations?*

Several key findings of this study—represented across three chapters of findings—expose the complexity of co-construction that is integral to interpreting individual experiences within the institutional culture that I studied. First, learning institutional culture transpires for students as an ongoing, multifaceted process throughout and beyond their first year. Immersion, trial and error, and observation serve as tactics students rely upon to learn how to perform cultural norms. Knowing the idiosyncrasies of institutional culture and enacting the peer norms prove one's membership as a student within the institution, which contributes to the ways in which we understand first-year students' display of their sense of belonging.

Second, friendships developed during the first year appear as interconnected constellations that engender campus support. Envisioning campus friendships as constellations, students manage a nebulous compartmentalization of peers. In this way, students anchor themselves with a core group of friends and cluster other friends based on defined interests. While friendship networks remain nebulous, students describe their core group of friends as homogenous based on gender and political dispositions. Understanding the structure and

composition of friendship groups is important to making sense of the ways in which campus friendships filter and affect students' perceptions of the institutional culture. In particular, students utilize their constellations to reframe abrasive encounters with the institutional culture, thus marking interpretative cultural reconstruction as a cooperative activity conducted among friends. The ways in which these constellations contribute to these reconstructions produce numerous interpretations and perceptions of institutional culture. In other words, the same event could be interpreted differently by different groups based upon their unique co-construction. This study contributes to the literature that institutional culture is not monolithic and that it is the composition of multiple, distinct, overlapping subgroups each with their own (sometimes competing or paradoxical) perspectives and assumptions (e.g. Schein, 2010).

Third, institutional rituals produce in students feelings of belonging through shared emotions. Ceremonies that celebrate individual identities (such as a candle lighting ceremony for first-year women) suggest through symbolic actions a strong sense of mattering that deepens institutional connection. This analysis contributes to the literature by renewing the importance of individual identities and feelings of mattering during transition.

Finally, minoritized students encounter and endure differential interactions with the institutional culture. Friendships, often developed through cultural student organizations, facilitate transition and deflect discrimination experienced by minoritized students. While most students of color in the study enjoy friendships, only ten minoritized students in this study explained challenges in making lasting friendships. This finding relates to the literature on feelings of alienation and isolation on campus (e.g. Azmitia et al., 2013). These ten students include participants from racial backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in higher education as well as individuals following countercultural gender scripts that buck hegemony. For several

of these students, race, sexual orientation, and gender performativity intersect. These participants demonstrate self-reliance that resulted in hopeful self-empowerment in the face of transitional isolation. Understanding these processes provides the opportunity for researchers and practitioners to unravel the complexities of campus cultures that impinge upon student success. The dissertation concludes with implications drawn for theory and future research.

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