

Marissa Antosh
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Professor Disbrow
Programming lesson

The First Year Experience

Transitioning to college is like entering another world. Graduating seniors may think they know what to expect, but they don't really know what they're getting into. I would like to develop a program in which students who have completed their first year in college come back and share their experiences with students about to graduate from high school.

The objective of The First Year Experience is to share first year college experiences with students who are about to embark on college. While everyone is different, I think having an idea of what others went through could assuage some anxiety about starting college. With help from guidance counselors at the local high school, I'd like to identify students who are likely to come back from college and be willing to talk to students about to graduate. I see it as being an informal panel discussion with a moderator.

The First Year Experience is not intended to be an exhaustive do-and-don't examination of college. I would block out two hours total for the program but not be overly rigid about it. To begin, I'd have each member of the panel introduce themselves and tell where they go to school. Ideally there would be a pretty even mix of boys and girls from all levels of colleges. It would depend on the diversity of the town and who was willing to participate, but a decent cross-section would be preferable. I'd have two moderators, the teen librarian and a well-know member of the high school faculty. That way, if the questions got thin, one or both of the moderators could help direct the discussion.

I don't see this program as requiring a lot of materials. I think the week prior to the event, a box could be made available for people to write down questions they have that can be addressed at the program. Not everyone wants to get up and ask a question—I'm sure some people would like to remain anonymous, especially if their question is of a sensitive nature. I'd like to put together a small packet for each attendee with a sheet containing tips from the panel of first-year students, some resources and useful websites, and the contact information for the panel members if they agree to be available.

A question-and-answer session can get stale, so about halfway through I'd ask attendees to write a letter to themselves a year from now. Their packet would contain an envelope and a blank sheet of paper. I'd suggest they reflect on where they are now and where they expect to be when they read the letter in a year. Clearly I wouldn't read their letters—I'd encourage them to seal it and write their address on the front. At the end of the program, I'd collect the letters and the evaluation sheet I'd include with their materials. This way, they get to reflect on both themselves and the program. Then I'd keep the letters to send to them in one year. My senior year English teacher had her classes complete this letter exercise and I found it quite illuminating. I'm sure some of my classmates just stuffed the blank paper into their envelope, and while that is not the goal, I wouldn't check to see what they wrote.

Planning for this event would have to begin a year in advance in order to have students available who have just completed their first year of college. However, once the ball started rolling, it'd be excellent to have students who attended the program the year before come back and share their experiences with the next bunch. For the price of a few folders and pencils, I'd like to be able to run this program effectively and ease the big college transition for students.