Bridging the gap from school to University

Dr Jenni Underhill

"Every student has a first-year experience, whether it is an experience desired by campus leadership or not."

"Moving beyond isolated initiatives is no longer an option; it is a necessity."

"The first-year is not "grade 13". Incoming students, whether they come to college from high school or from the world of work, enter a new culture."

Mary Stuart Hunter (2006:4 - 6)

Tinto (1987) argued that students with a lower rate of academic success or institutional engagement are more likely to drop out of university.

The argument was supported by six potential causes of student departure out of universities namely: **adjustment, goals, commitments, uncertainty, congruence, and isolation** – all of which are related to **either social or academic adjustment**, or a combination of both.

Upcraft et al., (2005) added to Tinto's (1987) argument by providing tangible evidence suggesting that student transition is much more than the academic skills taught but also importantly the combination of **both social and academic skills** (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989; Upcraft et al., 2005)

What challenges face First Years in "normal" circumstances

- Feeling disconnected (backgrounds, social-economic status)
- Struggling to develop habits such as time management, prioritization, and staying healthy.
- SA students in a state of constant hunger and financial stress (Henn, et.al., 2017).
- Acclimating to academic expectations that may be more challenging than anticipated.
- Managing a level of social and cultural diversity that may be different from the communities with which they are most familiar.
- Comparing oneself to others and becoming discouraged.
- Having difficulty managing relationships, both at home and at school.

Additional Challenges

- Large class sizes.

- Mixed-age and mixed-ability classes.

- Digital literacy.

- Academic literacy and literacies.

- Insufficient funding for equipment/resources/data.

- Lack of institutional support.

- **And now Covid as well as post-pandemic anticipations.**

History of the FYE (USA)

- Began in 1964 (University of South Carolina) (Townsend, 1994)

- 1986: National Research Center for the Freshman Year Experience

- 1995: National Resource Center for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition

- Today FYE programmes in many countries outside the USA

Factors leading to the creation of the FYE

- Massive **expansion** and **widening of access** to HE.
- Many new students are **first generation** HE entrants.
- Students arriving **without needed life skills.**
- Less effective peer culture (integration).
- Changing curricula and courses – **making the wrong choices…**

- **Question then and now "how do we engage students?" (Kuh, 2008)**

Who are the students?

- What is the current profile of a first year student?
- What do they need?
- What are the demands of the 21st Century?
- What has to change?
- What needs to be included?

Pedagogical underpinnings for teaching and learning 21st century skills

- WE need to deliver education **with** students, not to them (Dillon, 2017)

- Transformative teaching and learning practices

- Focus is on student empowerment and self-directed learning

- New learning environments

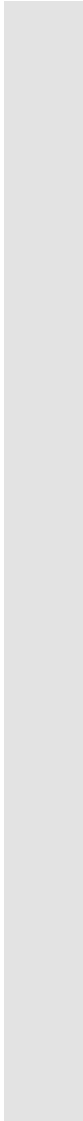# The C's and how they impact **thinking** of our students

- Creativity
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Cross cultural understanding
- Career
- Collective knowledge

Skills and practices to be rigorously included……

- Collaboration
- Values, ethics, and goal setting
- Critical thinking
- Creativity and innovation skills
- New technology skills
- Incorporating diverse knowledge bases

21st Century educator

- Our aim is to create a classroom that cultivates 21st Century skills
- We are here because we are living in a place of anticipation and we have to react
- WE need students to demonstrate what they know and are able to do
- We need to model 21st Century skills – social and cross cultural skills
- Accountability, ethics and values
- Demonstrate flexibility and accountability

- **We need to be able to reach and teach all our students**

Digital citizenship

- Its not only learning about new technologies and gadgets but how to implement and integrate these into the classroom meaningfully.

- Critical discernment of technologies and not technology for technology sake.

Deeper learning competencies

- Strengthen link between the classroom and the outside world.
- Problem solving skills so that students can transfer information and experience across content areas.
- Establish opportunities for students to apply skills in authentic situations.

Foster relationships with students

- Create a sense of community for students = foster communication.
- Teach students a higher level of communication than just that of social media.

Independent student—three areas

- Discovery learning
  - Student draws on her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships and new perspectives to be learned
- Self-directed learning
  - self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning
- Peer group learning (cooperative learning)
  - learning from peers

What type of support students need…

- Time management
- Motivational control
- Metacognitive awareness
- New modules designed for 21st Century teaching & learning

Reflection and critical thinking - these questions underpinning our way forward

- What did we learn?

- SO what? – relevancy, purposefulness, usefulness

- Now what? – how does this fit into what we are learning? Does it affect our thinking? Can we predict where we are going?

Students need to self assess the C's – students at the centre of their FYE

- Which C's represent my strengths
- Which C's are areas I need to work on in the future?
- What evidence do I have to show that I am improving a specific skill?

The First Year Experience…

- "…a comprehensive and institutional approach to the first college year. It comprises both curricular and co-curricular initiatives. It is the sum of the experiences students have in their first year of college. The FYE is far more than a single event, program or course"
  - M Stuart Hunter (2006:6)

Some well-known initiatives

- First year seminars additional to first year courses -
- Designed to engage students in critical thinking – discussion and debate.
- Students sign up for courses of interest given by academics outside of set curriculum. These range from politics, gender relations, psychology, art, culture through to the sciences.
- Students are encouraged to become part of an intellectual communities to feel a sense of belonging.
- Students are organized into "groups" to host socials, organize activities, invite guests to speak about campus organizations and student clubs.

University of Auckland, NZ

- "UniGuides"- volunteer senior students act as mentors to first years in the first 6- 14 weeks on campus.

- 8-12 students in a group from same departments.

- "…the ongoing high level of contact between a small number of students may be sufficient to create cohesive peer groups that buffer the academic and social difficulties of early university life. Isolation can be a formidable barrier to student adjustment to university life" (Peat et al, 2001:200).

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

- First Year Advisors in departments – report to First Year Coordinator outside a faculty
- Academics responsible for the FYE in their disciplines
- Their brief:
  - Help students to settle into their first year of study
  - Assist students to become self-managed learners
  - Facilitate orientation and ongoing activities to support
  - Academic Development
  - Providing leadership in enhancing the first year

Zayed University, UAE

- Free education to Emirati women
- Mainly ESL students
- First generation students
- Many students "at risk"
- Workshops of life skills and academic skills
- Revolutionary in that students "spoke –up"
- Career development

University of Stellenbosch- some features

- FYA – First Year Academy -success depends on collective responsibility
- Some features:
  - Early assessment: some form of assessment in first year modules- early support intervention can be offered
  - TLC's in each faculty
  - Tutor and mentor programmes esp. counsellors in residence

University of Stellenbosch- some features

- Electronic support and monitoring: information about students academic progress available to students, lecturer and management

- Res Ed- extend support to student living area, senior students are "academic coaches"

UFS (Covid FYE) (Combrick & Ootshuzien, 2020)

- Initially a face-to- face summer school intervention

- Intervention interrupted half way at the beginning of 2020 (quick move online)

- Academic skills taught on LMS

- Low tech and self-study guide that could be downloaded

- Analysis of three groups of first year students reaction to their different orientations

- Conclusion: although students happy to be learning, content alone is not enough to help students transition into first year

AFDA (School for the Creative Economies)

- Learning circles and learning circle coordinators

- Tutor programme

- Teaching team

- Reflection module (monitors student experience) not just course evaluations

- Contextual Studies modules – Collaboration, Goal setting, Ethics and Values, Critical Thinking

Our Reflection

- The most interesting students do is….
- The most important ideas they learn are…..
- The most useful information my classes provide are…..
- The things that inspire creativity in students are…..
- The most surprising information about students is….
- The most unforgettable class is……….
- The most important ideas that cause students to think more deeply are ……….
- The way in which students defend their opinions are…………..

For lecturer consideration

- What was your first year experience like?

- What do you perceive students to experience now as first years?

- Are you satisfied with what support you have seen given to those going onto study in your work environment?

- What support can you offer to potential students?

- What is the most important preparation we can give learners going into first year?