

Constructing a Life: Transitions Toward Self-Authorship
A Facilitator Guide for
SENIORS: FOUR YEARS IN RETROSPECT
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This Guide is designed to help facilitators use **Seniors** in a variety of institutional settings. Possible applications include:

Student Life and Curricular Programs

Applications:

- Residence Life Education
- Orientation and First-year Programs
- Gender and Diversity Awareness
- Student Leader Training
- Senior Year Experience Programs
- Capstone Courses

Objectives:

1. Help students identify and understand the role of transitions in the college experience.
2. Develop strategies to mitigate academic pressures and maintain academic motivation.
3. Help integrate curricular and co-curricular experiences.
4. Evaluate the pros and cons of changing majors, revising career plans, taking a year off, and other course changes.
5. Identify sources of support, safety nets and lifelines.
6. Isolate and identify factors that can help students construct a life for themselves.
7. Identify anxieties particular to **Seniors** as they anticipate leaving the university.

Faculty and Staff Training

Applications:

- Residence Assistants
- Counselors and Career Counselors
- Peer Counseling
- Academic Advisors
- Alumni or Enrollment Management Staff

Objectives

1. Illustrate the developmental process from first year to graduation with a focus on aspects of the self, which change during that process.
2. Identify the sources of support (e.g. family, institutional agents, and processes) that help students persist to graduation
3. Isolate different situations and the strategies students use to successfully manage themselves
4. Illustrate concepts of transition theory and demonstrate how adult development is an on-going life process
5. Identify ways in which students prepare for graduation and a career.

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FACILITATOR PREPARATION

I. Background to *Seniors*

In the fall of 1990, filmmakers Dayna Goldfine and Dan Geller moved into a freshman residence hall at Stanford with their cameras. Their video, *FROSH*, follows nine students through their freshman year from move-in day to spring final examinations.

Three years later, the filmmakers picked up the stories of five of these students and began shooting again. Their new film, ***Seniors***, chronicles the different trajectories each of these students took to graduation. Honest and frank, it shows students grappling with transitions – sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Ultimately, all find their own path to a successful and fulfilling college experience and into adulthood. The film interweaves cinema verite-style scenes from freshman and senior year with thoughtful interviews where the students look back at their four years in school.

They reflect on the challenges and obstacles they faced: developing study skills; difficulties choosing a major; seeking a fit with Greek and other campus organizations, and work-study jobs; finding a voice in student leadership positions. They are seen negotiating thorny issues of gender, race and identity as well as personal relationship; at the end, they wrestle with career and graduate school goals. We watch as these students mature and come to a more thorough understanding of themselves, especially with respect to their present college environment and future objectives. In short, we see each constructing a life.

II. Seniors Character Summary

Monique - An African American woman who left behind a crack addicted mother to come to Stanford on full scholarship, Monique struggles with motivation and almost drops out freshman year. But supported by significant African American staff and peers, she gets a mentor, takes stock and redirects her life. Her direct, candid, blunt manner helps her confront things as she sees them. Monique finds direction and purpose, graduates with honors, and is led to graduate school and a career in teaching.

Debbie - A white student from Connecticut, Debbie enters Stanford filled with naiveté and self-doubt. She pledges a sorority, flunks chemistry, and washes out of pre-med. She switches to women's studies and begins to see complexity in relationships and her own life. Gaining self-confidence, Debbie reassesses her friendships, goals and direction, resigns from her sorority, eventually comes full circle and goes on to a prestigious medical school.

Cheng - A first generation Chinese-American from Ohio, Cheng's self-concept is threatened when he no longer earns all A's. He places high, yet narrow expectations on himself, seeing college as instrumental to career goals, and suffers acute academic and career pressures. His conservative outlook leads lead him to found a student economic policy group as a support base. We follow Cheng as he sweats out his job interviews and his eventual job choices.

Sam - A white male who enters Stanford from a protected all-boys Catholic school experience in New Jersey, Sam speaks openly about his insecurities. He desperately seeks a girlfriend and desires to fit in. A self-described "jock," Sam becomes assistant manager of the basketball team and begins to find a safe and secure niche for himself within a more pluralistic and feminist environment. By senior year, Sam has it all: he's the relaxed president of his fraternity, manager of the basketball team, and has a girlfriend. But how open is he to an examined life?

Brandi - As an African American woman who grew up in a predominately white mid-western community, Brandi explores her personal identity through immersion in African American studies. But her new identity development leaves her struggling for career direction and life

purpose so she stops out just prior to graduation and works in a mall. Her renewed purpose is evident in her mature reflections of her new goals when she returns to graduate.

(NOTE: Viewers should note that while the five students are diverse in gender and ethnicity, all are traditional-age residential students enrolled full-time at a highly selective private university. They may not reflect the transfer student, part-time, commuter or older adult student experience.)

III. About Stanford

Viewers should consider how Stanford as an educational and cultural institution compares to their own campus. While there are dramatic differences, there are remarkable similarities common to all students' experiences.

Stanford is a selective private research university of some 6,500 undergraduates (and 6,000 graduate students) located in Palo Alto, just south of San Francisco. Most entering freshmen graduated in the top 10% of their high school classes and are a diverse group. In **Seniors'** freshman class, 55% were men and 45% women; 25% were Asian American, 10% Latino, 8% African American and 2% Native American.

Stanford's annual tuition, room and board has now reached \$30,000 but two-thirds of entering freshmen get some kind of aid and several students featured in the video were heavily subsidized.

All freshmen live on campus. The initial setting of this video is a small, coed hall of 80 residents representative of the demographic composition of their class. Hall staff included four R.A.s and a married couple who served as resident fellows. Most students move off campus as upperclassmen, and at least one of the **Seniors** reflects the commuter experience. While most students graduate in four years, one student in **Seniors**, Brandi, did drop out.

IV. Preview Seniors & Plan Session

Due to the many ways **Seniors** can be used, facilitators should preview the video to identify themes that meet their specific learning goals. Make particular note of the video counter numbers so you can return to key scenes during the group discussion. This discussion guide includes brief comments on transition theory, discussion questions, references to key segments of the video, and a brief character analysis. If you have a longer training time, we encourage you to preview FROSH also and consider its possible use preceding **Seniors**. Running time for **Seniors** is 60 minutes.

Seniors Synopsis

(numbers indicate elapsed time)

Seniors consists of case studies of five students. After a brief introduction, each student is profiled in turn.

First Frame:

00:00 "A Presentation of California Newsreel"

Introduction:

00:05 "We asked a simple question..."

Monique:

1:59 First Year

8:34 Senior Year

Debbie

13:59 First Year

20:50 Senior Year

Cheng

25:12 First Year

29:57 Senior Year

Sam

36:00 First Year

43:40 Senior Year

Brandi

46:11 First Year

52:11 Senior Year

56:49 Epilogue

60:00 End of Video

I. Pre-Screening Activities: Setting the Context (allow 10 -15 minutes)

For upperclassmen and staff: Ask them to draw a time-line of their college experience from enrollment to graduation, noting key events and decision points. Or have them note key decision points on separate notecards and then work as a group to cluster them into time-sequenced categories.

Next, lead a group discussion asking such questions as "Looking back at your college experience, how have you changed, and why? What were key transitions? What advice would you give incoming students to help them best capitalize on their college experience?"

For freshmen: As a group exercise, brainstorm ten potential issues/decisions of consequence students might realistically face during the next four years. Write down the list on the blackboard and flesh out, but don't discuss in detail now.

II. Critical Viewing of Seniors (allow 60 minutes)

Invite participants to make a list as they watch the video of the events, issues, or decision points faced by each character. Compare this list to their own lists generated in the Pre-Screening Activities (above). Ask participants to pay special attention to how each student confronted his or her issues and whether their self-definitions changed as they did so.

III. Post-Screening: A Transitions Model (allow 30-90 minutes)

Seniors opens a unique window on adult transitions and how students adjust to life changes. Transition theory generally concerns the exiting of some role, place, or way-of-being to adopt, adjust to, or assume a new role, place, or circumstance. Some authors (Chickering & Schlossberg, 1995; Louis, 1980) have aptly described the cycle as a process of moving-in, moving-through, and moving-out. Each of these three stages brings its own tasks, issues, and challenges. This transition model can be applied to personal relationships, a change of status (such as from student to worker), a job change, even stages of parenting.

The sequence of coming to college, moving through the experience, to graduating and moving on, is a transition cycle. Schlossberg's "Four S" model: Situation, Support, Self, and Strategies will help students understand the concept of transitions. Schlossberg (1984) describes the transition cycle as the dynamic interaction between the individual and his or her unique characteristics (self); the transition and its characteristics (situation); the environment with options and social support systems (support); and the coping strategies available (strategies).

Analyzing transitions in terms of each of these elements will help students better negotiate the stages of matriculation through college from one adaptive process to the next and on to professional or graduate education, a job, and relationships. [See Chickering and Schlossberg, 1995; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters & Goodman, 1995.]

MOVING IN

Moving-In is the process of leaving one known context behind and entering into an exciting, albeit scary, new one. This may be triggered by choice (e.g. taking a new job, accepting a leadership role, starting college) or involuntarily (e.g. the loss of a significant other, being laid-off). For students, moving-in starts a process of transition, where they will assume new roles, routines, relationships, and find themselves in the new setting of college. To manage change successfully, students can take stock with the four S's: Situation, Support, Self, and Strategies.

Situation:

- a) Is this a good time to leave home (or college)?
- b) What aspects of the new situation do you find most challenging or causes you the most anxiety (e.g. living in a residence hall, academically competitive peers, handling finances)?
- c) What experiences have you already undergone that will help you adjust to this new situation (e.g. have you lived away from home before)?

Support:

- a) In general, how much do you need:
 - Agreement (that others deem your decision appropriate or understandable)?
 - Assistance or aid (tangible help such as tutoring, editing, study groups, party mixers for finding dates)?
 - Affection (respect, love, caring, understanding)?
 - Feedback (responses that reinterpret situations, provide a different perspective, challenge or reaffirm your interpretation)?
- b) What support role does the family play in **Seniors**? Compare Monique, Cheng and Brandi.
- c) At different points, each of the students felt they were heading down a wrong path but most had support in school. Discuss the support given Monique by her friends, her residence dean and her job at the Haas Center. What sorts of safety-nets and lifelines are available to you, both formal and informal? Which ones are most effective? Ineffective? How do you get reluctant people to listen?
- d) Have you ever tried to deter a student from self-defeating behaviors? What did you do? Did it work? Why or why not?

Self:

- a) How did you feel when you headed off to college? Excited? Anxious? Overwhelmed? Hopeful? In control? In denial? How have you coped with other transition points in your life or college experiences (upperclassmen and staff should refer to items on their Pre-Screening Activity lists)?

- b) What reasons did the students in **Seniors** give for attending college? What about you? Has that changed during your experience here? Try to identify and isolate your own endogenous reasons (personal desires) for attending college from the exogenous ones (economic, family, and peer pressures).
- c) How aware are you of why you respond to college life the way you do? Is there anything about your gender, age, socioeconomic situation, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or health that is pertinent to adjusting to college? How is your mental health? Are you confident or clueless? Are you usually aware of your values and beliefs and why you behave as you do?

Strategies:

- a) What initial adjustment strategies do you usually employ when you find yourself in new and unfamiliar circumstances (e.g. hang back and observe, seek out a sage, find a friend, do advance research, etc.)? What strategies did you think would be needed moving into and through college?
- b) What high school strategies might not work well in college (think about Monique and Brandi)?
- c) What are you willing to sacrifice or endure to achieve your goals (consider Sam's taking on the perceived lowly position of assistant basketball manager)?
- d) When things aren't working out, are you the type of person who tends to endure, quits, tries to change your own behaviors (e.g. joins a study group), or tries to change the circumstance (i.e. change dorms, change advisor)?

MOVING THROUGH

After Moving-In to a new experience, the process of adjustment and managing day-to-day begins. A specific "Moving-Through" process might be short (e.g. a two week institute), it might be longer (e.g. four years of college) or it might be a life time task (e.g. marriage or being an adult child of your parents). After the initial Moving-In adjustment cycle, Moving-Through college consists of many tasks: deciding on a major; maximizing learning both inside and outside the classroom; test-taking; and time management. The Moving-Through process for traditional-age students also includes various psycho-social tasks such as developing mature relationships, negotiating class, gender and racial differences, and finding one's place in the community. Again, the "Four S" Model can help you identify and assess the challenges of Moving-Through.

Situation:

- a) A college degree is usually connected to a career plan. How did these students integrate their career interests with their curriculum and extracurricular activities? Think about Cheng's initial goals and his final job.
- b) Isolate and describe the different exogenous and endogenous forces affecting your career choices (as you did above with respect to reasons for attending college). Are they in conflict? Which are most important to you?
- c) Why was it a good decision for Debbie to drop pre-med and change majors? In general, when might it be good to change majors and revise career plans? Bad?
- d) Brandi made a surprising decision to stop out of college during senior year. Why did she do so? Was this a good idea? When would it have been a bad idea? What are the pressures to maintain continuous enrollment?
- e) Students at competitive colleges like Stanford often get stressed-out about academic achievement and can lose balance quickly. To what extent did the students in **Seniors** find balance between academics, personal life, and campus involvement?

Support:

- a) How have peers shaped your experience in general? Have they been positive, helping you attain your personal goals? Or negative, with peers eroding your sense of self, purpose and values?
- b) What role have specific affinity groups played in your personal and social development (e.g. Greeks, roommates, campus jobs, sports teams, classmates in majors, faculty and staff)?
- c) Brandi remarked on being one of only four African American women in an 80 person residence hall. Why was this a problem for her? How do students on your campus deal with the feeling of being different or alone (based on race, ethnicity, class, national origin, sexual orientation, geographic region, etc.)? What is the value of a safe place (sororities, fraternities, theme houses)? Where have you found safe places?
- d) Do students develop more effective social skills in groups with greater homogeneity such as theme houses, or are potential social discomforts simply screened out?
- e) How did faculty make a difference to the lives of Monique, Brandi, and Debbie? How much of an impact do faculty have on the experience of students at your school?
- f) Describe the intervention made by staff in Monique's life. Why did they succeed? Do you think non-African American or non-female staff would have reached out the same way? Would Monique have been as responsive? How important is it to have diverse staff? Are advisors and role models more important for first-generation college students such as Monique?
- g) Debbie's advisor bluntly suggested she drop pre-med given her problems in chemistry. How do you think he handled her problem? Was he insensitive or was this good advice?

- h) Cheng seems just as obsessed and insecure as a senior than as a freshman. Could his advisor have done anything else to help?

Self:

- a) Each of the three women found their identities challenged by identity-based courses (African-American Studies, Women's Studies). To what extent did their identities become more fixed or more fluid? How did their new racial or gender-based identities affect their personal development and self-concept? The men, Sam and Cheng, did not take ethnic studies courses. Describe and compare their racial or ethnic identities to the women. Can academic courses help you "find yourself"?
- b) To what extent is your personal identity tied to your race. What other identities do you have? How fixed or fluid are these identities? Why might racial identity play a larger role for a student of color than a white student?
- c) Debbie says going through rush opened "herself up to rejection" because she was participating in a process in which she would be judged. Where do you look for personal affirmation on a campus?
- d) Debbie asked Sam how he thought he was viewed by persons of color and women. Have you ever had to reconcile your own view of yourself with contrary views held by others?
- e) Critics and proponents argue whether Greek Life and ethnic theme houses promote cultural diversity or campus "balkanization." What do you think? Schools wish to promote individual and group identity while building an inclusive community. Is this a contradiction or can these objectives be reconciled?
- f) These students went from tentative, first-year students asking "Who am I?" to more secure, searching seniors asking "Who do I want to be?" What's the difference? What were the most important factors in each student's discovery of his or her sense of identity in college (students should refer to their "critical viewing" notes)?

Strategies:

- a) Several students employed different strategies for getting through college. What were they? How do you find strategies? How might strategies change through the course of the experience (think about Monique and Brandi)?
- b) Which experiences help you integrate learning? Have you ever been taught in an interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary manner? Have you participated in any cumulative experiences (capstone, summative self-evaluation, internships)? Have you had the opportunity to lead a class?
- c) Did any of the students have trouble "learning how to learn?" What experiences most helped you learn how to learn? Are you enrolled in courses that encourage learning

about learning (meta-learning) or courses that provide opportunities to apply academic knowledge?

- d) How do academics connect with life goals? Academics did not figure in Sam's profile. Is this significant? Did Sam learn less than the others?
- e) Describe the extra-curricular activities of Cheng, Sam, and Monique. How did these influence their learning and personal development? What have been your most profound and gratifying "non-formal" learning experience? Why? What about off-campus activities such as work, travel, community service, and personal relationships with faculty?
- f) Debbie "moved on" after a short time in her sorority experience. Have you ever stayed with an activity or organization too long? Conversely, have you left an activity or organization before you really gave it a chance?

MOVING OUT

The concept of Moving-Out is centered around the question "Where do I go from here?" - in this case, the process of exiting the college experience. Moving-Out ends one cycle (e.g. graduation from college) but it also begins another because it implies a moving-in to something new (e.g. starting graduate school or a new job). This Moving-Out process raises new questions. In what ways were students encouraged to reflect on their experience? In what ways were students encouraged to integrate their experiences? In what ways were students provided closure on their college experience? In what ways were students assisted in the transition from college? (see Gardner & Van der Veer, 1998). Viewers should examine these issues for the senior/post-graduate transition and try to apply these models to other life transitions (e.g. into parenthood, new careers, onset of a disability).

Situation:

- a) When discussing his job interview, Cheng mentions the "intangibles" that people notice. What does he mean? What are Cheng's intangibles? How would a job interviewer assess you? What are some intangibles not measured by standardized instruments? Make a list of the intangibles that are valued by your peers, your professors, and your prospective employer respectively. Are there conflicts? Which are your strongest intangibles?
- b) Why did Debbie return to her medical school interests? What difficulties might Monique face moving-in to being a teacher? What information do you usually need to feel comfortable assessing your options and making a big choice?
- c) Sam mentioned that every person "should go to college for 4 years, tend a bar for 6 months, and drive a cab for 2 months." Do you agree? What does it mean to be truly educated?

- d) How important is it to form alternative plans? What if you do not get admitted to your top graduate school choices or get the job you are seeking?

Support:

- a) Compare the ways in which Monique and Sam found people, organizations and ideas that helped each move towards an ideal self.
- b) In what ways has your thinking become more complex while in college? How was this facilitated? Were there any specific experiences/involvements/courses which prompted this development?
- c) What supports do you think each of the seniors will need in their next transition? What help will Monique need in grad school and teaching? Debbie in medical school? Sam as an assistant coach? Cheng in investment banking? Brandi in communications?

Self:

- a) Which student changed the most? Which the least? Why? Who got the most out of their college experience? The least?
- b) Which of the students came closest to: Discovering their true self? Reinventing their self? More fully realizing their self?
- c) What self esteem issues did you observe in the students in the video? Research shows that most students experience the lowest self-esteem in the first part of their first-year and in the latter part of their senior year? Why? What evidence of this phenomenon can you find in **Seniors**?
- d) Each of these students suffered setbacks which, at the time, felt monumental, e.g. Cheng's devastation from his first poor grade. How did each respond? What helped them recover?
- e) Debbie says, "I'm a hard worker." How does this self-label flow from her self-concept? What labels do you use to describe yourself? What does each say about your self-concept?
- f) How did identity characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation impact the learning and development process for each student? For yourself?
- g) What are the most positive lessons learned while in college that you will take with you into your life? What are the most negative lessons?

Strategies:

- a) What programs/courses/aspects of your college environment encourage reflection about your college experience?
- b) Each student struggles with trying to move from where they are to who they would like to be. Review Cheng's struggle in reconciling his revealed and ideal self.

- c) How did these students prepare for leaving Stanford? What intentional actions did they have to take (e.g. Debbie retaking the chemistry course she failed, Cheng using the placement center)?
- d) The video ended with an update on what each student is doing now. What strategies do you think each student learned that will most help that person successfully move-in to their next transition (e.g. Sam as a coach, Debbie in medical school, Monique as a teacher)?

RESOURCES

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For additional copies of **Seniors**, the Guide, or other videos for student life, contact [California Newsreel](#)