

DESIGNING AN ORIENTATION AND TRANSITION STRATEGY FOR COMMENCING STUDENTS

A conceptual summary of research and practice

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual summary of ideas and practices that have been shown, directly or indirectly, to contribute to commencing students' satisfaction, engagement and persistence in higher education. The framework is not intended to be either prescriptive or exhaustive, but rather, to provide a "shared language" for our ongoing reflections and discussions.

It is clear that there isn't "one right way" to design an orientation and transition strategy. Similarly, there aren't any guaranteed solutions or "magic bullets" that will impact on student retention or engagement. A reading of the available literature does however indicate that there are consistent needs and concern that students experience as they commence university. Understanding these needs provides a sound basis for designing effective orientation and transition strategies.

Thus the approach of this paper is to outline a framework for describing students needs with the hope that leaders responsible for the quality of the first year learning environment (orientation and beyond) will find this useful in planning locally responsive strategies.

Five areas of student need are proposed as relevant to their early success at university. These can be thought of as the 'five senses of success' and each suggests practice goals or areas for intervention.

The Five Sense of Success

1. Students' success at university depends on their sense of capability.

Students who are better prepared for the roles and tasks of university study (viz., 'learning ready') tend to have greater early academic success and are consequently more satisfied and persistent with their studies. A student's sense of capability depends on how well they understand what is expected of them in the student role, their mastery of basic academic skills and their level of commitment to contributing to their learning community. We can help develop a sense of capability by clarifying and negotiating expectations, providing entry level development of academic skills and engaging students as active members of a learning community.

2. Students' success at university depends on their sense of connectedness

Students with stronger connections are more likely to be successful learners, effective colleagues and happy people. A student's sense of connectedness depends on the quality of relationships with peers, with staff and their feelings of identification or affiliation with their School or University. We can help develop connectedness by providing opportunities for students to form good working relationships with their fellow students and with staff and encouraging them to get involved with the university.

3. Students' success at university depends on their sense of purpose

Students with a clear sense of purpose are not only more likely to find their study rewarding, but also to be more committed and persistent when the work gets challenging. A student's sense of purpose depends on their sense of vocation, their engagement with their discipline of study and their capacity to set personal goals. We can help develop a sense of purpose by providing opportunities for students to be as clear as they possibly can about their reasons for going to uni and their choice of degree, to see the relevance of their course of study and to systematically develop their strengths and talents.

4. Students' success at university depends on their sense of resourcefulness

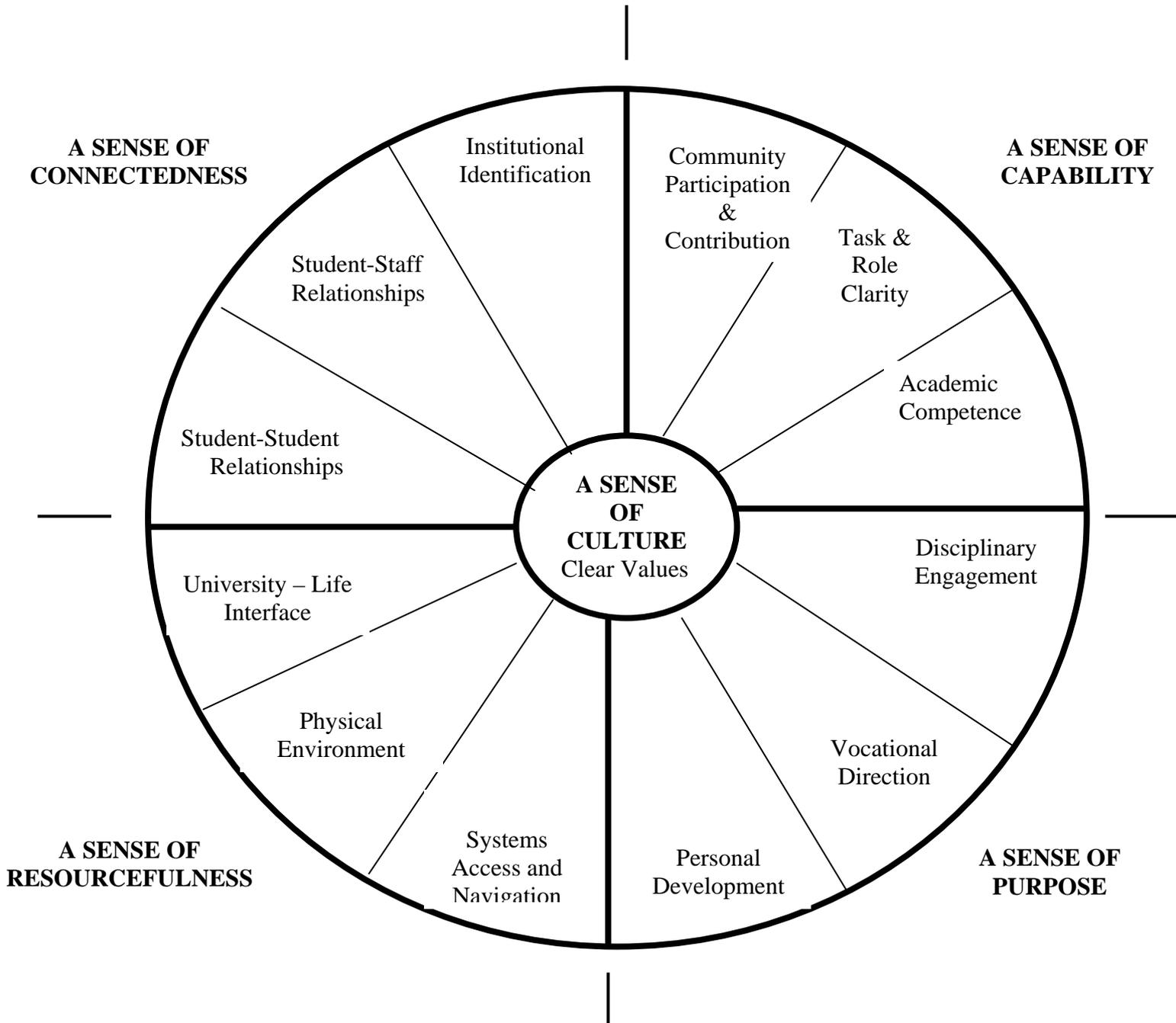
Successful students not only know how to study but also how to proactively manage the challenges of their whole university experience. A student's sense of resourcefulness depends on their ability to navigate the university system to get the help and information they need, willingness to speak up if they have a problem and an ability to balance their work, life and study commitments. We can help students to be more resourceful by providing clear and accessible roles, procedures and resources and encouraging timely help-seeking behaviour.

5. Students' success at university depends on their sense of academic culture

Successful students know the value of learning 'how things are done' and what is important or valued in new culture. A student's sense of cultural competence depends on their appreciation of the core values and ethical principles of the university and how these will inform their approaches to study and working relationships with fellow

staff and students. We can help students by clearly answering the question: “what is a university?”

The ‘Five Senses’ of Successful Transition



Applying the “five senses” framework

We invite you to use the five senses framework to reflect on your current priorities and approaches to managing the orientation and transition needs of your commencing students. You can use this as a means of individual reflection or as a framework to guide discussion with students or colleagues.

As you reflect on your current Orientation and Transition strategy you may find the following codes useful shorthand. This is not intended as a precise evaluation tool, rather as a stimulus to further discussion about appropriate goals and strategies for commencing students in your school or degree program.

- ✓ I think we do this we do this quite well
- ? I’m not sure if or how well we do this
- X I think we need to do this better
- I don’t think this is particularly relevant/useful in our situation

SENSE OF CONNECTION: Helping commencing students develop the relationships and connections that will support their success and enhance their satisfaction at university.				
Student to Student Relationships	✓	?	X	-
Quality of personal networks: Help me to make personal connections with other students (<i>e.g., hosting social activities, introduce yourself to the person besides/behind in lectures, relationship programs (e.g., ‘meet 3 new people each week)</i>)				
Purposeful co-operation: Help me to develop effective working relationships with fellow students in my courses (<i>e.g., group formation/team building activities in tutorials, undertaking cooperative projects, describe fellow students as colleagues</i>)				
Valuing of diversity: Help me ‘appreciate differences’ in my interactions with other students (<i>e.g., structured sharing of stories/experiences across age group, gender, culture, race, relate to Student Charter and to values of personal and intellectual respect</i>)				
Sense of solidarity: Help me feel a sense of membership of my student cohort (<i>e.g., encourage/fund student associations</i>)				
Access to experience: Help me to get to know and learn from the experience and modelling of senior students (<i>e.g., peer mentoring, peer tutoring, cross-year social events</i>)				
Encouraging peer support: Help me to give/receive help and support				

from fellow students (<i>e.g., study groups, home groups, car pooling</i>)				
Student and Staff Relationships	✓	?	X	-
Approachability: Help me to feel encouraged to talk with staff (<i>e.g., offering warm welcome, discuss common reasons why students may not approach staff (e.g., authority figures), clear information about consultation access on doors, websites</i>)				
Humanity: Help me to feel informed about the backgrounds and interests of staff with whom I will be working (<i>e.g., provide information about staff as people as well as academics, put staff photos on doors</i>)				
Understanding: Help me to better understand the wider roles and tasks of academic staff outside of the classroom (<i>e.g., work profiles of teaching, research, service & community involvement, communicating staff research interests</i>)				
Inclusion: Help me to feel known or recognised by at least one staff member (<i>e.g., tutors learn and use students' names in tutorials, ask and use students' names in lectures, allow opportunities for conversation before and after class</i>)				
Leadership: Help me to know the 'leaders and elders' of my School/program (<i>e.g., senior staff teaching in first year, showcasing achievements of research leaders in the School</i>)				
Collegiality: Help me to experience positive relationships between staff in the program (<i>e.g., speaking positively to students about colleagues' achievements</i>)				
Student and Institution Relationships	✓	?	X	-
Belonging: Help me feel like I belong or fit and that this is the right place for me (<i>e.g., normalise students' anxiety, acknowledge the diversity of people who attend university, be sensitive to low levels of social/cultural; capital (e.g., first in family to attend uni).</i>)				
Affiliation: Help me feel a sense of pride as a member of this university and program (<i>e.g., discuss/showcase School/staff achievements & success stories</i>)				
Aspiration: Help me to understand and connect with "what Griffith stands for" and the contribution it aspires to make in society (<i>e.g., discuss school/program mission and values and how this is put into practice</i>)				
Identity: Help me to identify with my School program (<i>e.g., explaining the 'history and story' of the university and my particular school/program, describe key milestones, set up a history board in the School, introduce past students and ask them to locate student role and</i>				

<i>voice in the 'school story')</i>				
SENSE OF CAPABILITY: Helping commencing students develop the skills and attitudes needed to be successful learners.				
Task and Role Clarity	✓	?	X	-
Negotiate expectations of self: Help me to be clear about what is expected of a university student (<i>e.g., discuss class attendance, amount of out-of-class work, in-class behaviours, form learning contracts between staff and students, Student Charter, etc.</i>)				
Negotiate expectations of staff: Help me to be clear about what I can expect from staff (<i>e.g., availability, teaching standards, quality of support/challenge, learning contracts, Student Charter, etc.</i>)				
Learning history: Help me to understand the ways in which 'studying at uni' will be different from my previous learning situations (<i>e.g., school, TAFE,</i>) or cultures (<i>e.g., international, cross-cultural</i>).				
Terminology: Help me by explaining/translating the academic (<i>e.g., lectures, tutorials, labs, etc</i>) and administrative (<i>e.g., HECS, etc</i>) language used at University				
Support efficacy: Help me to process/talk through aspects of the university student role that seem unclear or challenging (<i>e.g., Q & A sessions at the end of lectures, consultation sessions, transition workshops</i>)				
Early independence: Help me to 'get active' and to start self-managing my study as early as possible (<i>e.g., setting small achievable tasks on a weekly basis, encourage students self-assessing study skills and developing learning plans</i>)				
Consistency: Help me cope with the demands of different courses by providing consistent messages on important issues (<i>e.g., coordination between course convenors on approaches to assessment, referencing, etc</i>)				
Deliberate redundancy: Help me to be sure that I understand what is expected by repeating key messages in different ways and at different times (<i>e.g., Blackboard, emails at milestones, announcements at lectures, program booklets</i>)				
Normalising: Help me see that my early anxieties and concerns are normal and do not signify that I am not coping or do not belong (<i>e.g., discuss normal/common confusions or misconceptions about university held by students, offer reassurance</i>).				

Academic Competence	✓	?	X	-
Prior knowledge: Help me to get off to a good start or catch up by outlining the knowledge and skills that each course assumes I have mastered (<i>e.g., pre-semester or week-one self-tests on assumed prior knowledge</i>)				
Scaffolding: Help me to quickly come up to speed by providing opportunities to acquire assumed knowledge and skills (<i>e.g., recommended reading, self-study exercises, supplementary tutorials, peer tutoring/consultation</i>)				
Formative feedback: Help me to understand my required level of investment (<i>viz., how much work I have to do</i>) by providing an early indication of ‘how I am going’ without academic penalty (<i>e.g., setting progressive non-assessable exercises and tests</i>)				
Self-managed learning: Help me to take charge of my development as a university learner (<i>e.g., providing opportunities to self-assess my capabilities and develop a learning plan (e.g., Skillsworks tool,)</i>)				
First assessment hurdle: Help me achieve early success by deliberately managing (<i>e.g., type, timing, co-ordination, feedback, support</i>) my first pieces of assessment (<i>e.g., develop a program policy on first year assessment</i>).				
Help-seeking: Help me to understand and use the various academic supports and learning services available to students (<i>e.g., invite support and library staff into class, embed academic skills development exercises into class work, normalise the use of learning services for all students</i>).				
Validating: Help me to appreciate the capabilities that I already have (<i>e.g., validate the experiences of mature age and international students</i>).				
Community Participation	✓	?	X	-
Efficacy: Help me feel that I can positively influence my learning environment (<i>e.g., requesting student feedback, regular process reviews of tutorials</i>)				
Participation: Help me to be an active participant in the life of the School/University (<i>e.g., hosting welcoming events and activities, student BBQs, senior student lunches</i>)				
Contribution: Help me to contribute or get involved in my school/program by providing opportunities to help other students or staff (<i>e.g., peer-assistance programs, involvement in research programs</i>)				
Voice: Help me to have a voice by providing opportunities and forums for raising student opinions, concerns and problems (<i>e.g., student representatives, staff-student councils, consultation processes (e.g., focus groups, surveys Q&A at end of lectures)</i>).				
Ownership: Help me feel a sense of ownership of my school/program by including me in discussions and decisions (<i>e.g., consultation</i>)				

<i>process)</i>				
SENSE OF PURPOSE: Helping commencing students be clear about and committed to their educational and career choices.				
Disciplinary Engagement	✓	?	X	-
Relevance: Help me to appreciate the relevance of what I am studying to my current and future life/career (<i>e.g., link curriculum to job/career tasks,, link to current problems, provide relevant examples</i>).				
Coherence: Help me to understand the rationale for the structure and organisation of my degree program (<i>e.g., explaining the underlying purpose/goals of the curriculum, explain how courses build on each other</i>).				
Excitement: Help me to engage with the curriculum by sharing your own excitement and enthusiasm (<i>e.g., staff sharing questions/challenges of interest, staff sharing stories about research and/or practice</i>)				
Aspiration: Help me to personalise the curriculum by sharing stories of heroes and leaders in the field/discipline (<i>e.g., sharing the 'inside story' about key research or scholars, describing how 'breakthroughs' or 'paradigm shifts' changed the field</i>)				
Stimulation: Help me an active thinker by posing questions or challenges that capture my attention (<i>e.g., active learning tasks, 'challenging questions' at the beginning and end of class</i>)				
Conversation: Help me stay in touch with the curriculum by regularly checking whether I understand what is being taught (<i>e.g., Q & A sessions, provide opportunities to explain key ideas to peers</i>)				
Vocational Direction	✓	?	X	-
Sense of direction: Help me develop a sense of my future identity (<i>e.g., as a professional, graduate or citizen</i>) by providing opportunities to discuss my motivations and goals for study (<i>e.g., class discussions, Career Smarter web tool</i>)				
Aspiration: Help me develop a sense of where this degree might take me by providing opportunities to meet role models and hear graduate success stories (<i>e.g., early career sessions, invited speakers, field projects</i>)				
Motivation: Help me to appreciate how my desired career direction connects with what I am studying (<i>e.g., class discussions, Career Smarter</i>)				

Personal Development	✓	?	X	-
Self-managed learning: Help me to mature by providing opportunities to realistically assess my skills and capabilities and develop meaningful learning plans (<i>e.g., self-assessment exercises, Skillsworks web tool</i>)				
Encouraging: Help me broaden my thinking about university as an opportunity to grow and develop as a person (<i>e.g., membership of student associations, class discussions which challenge ideas and attitudes, discuss the attributes of a Griffith Graduate, Expectations@griffith web tool, Communityworks web tool</i>)				
Extra-Curricula participation: Help me to be aware of and encourage me to make use of the opportunities for social and recreational activity at university (<i>e.g., encourage involvement in extra-curricular activities</i>)				
SENSE OF RESOURCEFULNESS: Helping commencing students develop the resources they will need to support their success at university.				
Systems Navigation	✓	?	X	-
Procedural clarity: Help me to be clear about the main University and School procedures and practices that will affect my progress in my degree (<i>e.g., outlining key milestones,</i>)				
Information access: Help me to find the information I need by organising and locating it in readily accessible locations and formats (<i>e.g., Learning @Griffith, program manuals</i>).				
Role clarity: Help me to seek assistance by clearly explaining and documenting the roles and responsibilities of key staff (both academic and administrative) in my degree program (<i>viz., who to ask and how to ask</i>) (<i>e.g., student-friendly role statements</i>).				
Procedural justice: Help me to feel that the system works fairly by clearly outlining the ways I can raise concerns or appeal decisions (<i>e.g., clear and sincere statements about valuing fairness in the School, provide examples of common complaints and how they can be solved</i>).				
Access to advising: Help me to seek timely assistance by establishing and explaining 'student friendly' advising practices and procedures (<i>e.g., announcements by FYAs at lectures, drop-in consultation sessions, outreach strategies</i>).				
Referral connections: Help me to make the best use of university services by introducing me to support staff (<i>e.g., introduce support staff in lectures, explain ways to access assistance, links to First Year</i>)				

<i>web site)</i>				
Facilitating help-seeking: Help me to develop effective help-seeking skills and attitudes (<i>e.g., providing opportunities to discuss common student challenges and ways to manage these, anticipating when challenges are likely to occur (i.e., predictable milestones) and suggesting strategies to whole class</i>)				
Just-in-time information: Help me to build my capacity to navigate the system by reminding me of important deadlines and milestones (<i>e.g., regular emails, Academic Calendar reminders in lectures</i>)				
Deliberate redundancy: Help me to be sure that I understand what is expected by repeating key messages in different ways and at different times (<i>e.g., emails, announcements in class</i>)				
Physical Environment	✓	?	X	-
Predictability: Help me to orient to my physical environment (<i>e.g., guided tours, extra signage early in semester</i>).				
Belonging: Help me to develop a sense of place (<i>e.g., developing a distinct local vibe or character in buildings</i>)				
Community: Help me interact and connect with other students (<i>e.g., by providing conversation spaces, organising classrooms to facilitate interaction</i>)				
Convenience: Help me by providing flexible services and amenities (<i>e.g., afterhours services, extended access to facilities</i>)				
Aspiration: Help me feel a sense of identity through my environment (<i>e.g., photographs of key figures/icons in the discipline, posters of great studies/experiments in hallways, honour rolls of graduates, inspirational statements and cultural messages</i>).				
Safety and security: Help me to understand the ways I can be safe and secure while I am attending university (<i>e.g., how to get assistance/contact security, how to maintain my personal safety, protect belongings, clarify my obligations for health and safety</i>)				
University-Life Interface	✓	?	X	-
Translation: Help me explain the meaning of 'going to uni' to significant others in my life (<i>e.g., ways to explain uni to family/parents and partners</i>).				
Realistic appraisal: Help me make my study more feasible by facilitating me to realistically appraise "what's involved" (<i>e.g., discussions of effort required to succeed</i>)				
Balancing: Help me to manage the competing demands and commitments of my life (<i>e.g., workload planning, flexible timetabling</i>)				

<i>of tutorials, life-work-study balance strategies)</i>				
Sustainability: Help me manage the practicalities of ‘being a student’ (<i>e.g., advice on finance/budget, accommodation, welfare, part time employment</i>)				
SENSE OF ACADEMIC CULTURE Helping commencing students understand the core scholarly values and ethical principles of the university	✓	?	X	-
Academic integrity: Help me to understand the ethical use of information (<i>e.g., explaining referencing procedures, explaining common student “mistakes and misunderstandings”</i>)				
Collegiality: Help me to appreciate the basis of effective and respectful interactions with my peers and staff				
Independence: Help me to work towards independence and self-management				
Critical thinking: Help me to value critical thinking and inquiry				
Inquiry: Help me to value a spirit of curiosity and openness to new ideas.				