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A new focus on sophomores

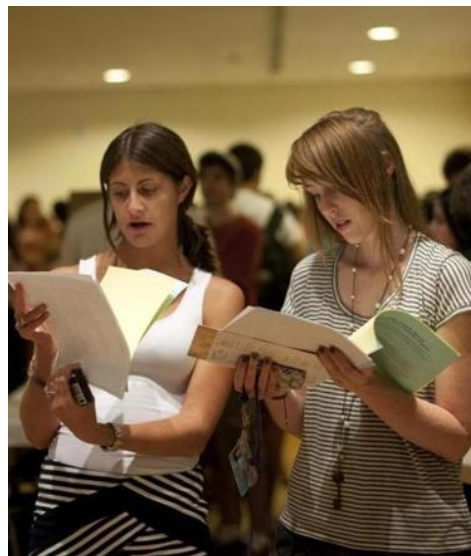
By Mary Carmichael | GLOBE STAFF | SEPTEMBER 03, 2011

It looked like a typical college freshman orientation: hundreds of teenagers milling around a ballroom, deans and professors chatting in the corners, tables laden with brochures, brownies, and bottled water. Fall classes were about to begin at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, and students had come to the campus center in droves for the Academic Extravaganza, a chance to meet department heads and try on new identities. Some of them clutched planners stamped "class of 2014."

No, that's not a typo.

This extravaganza was for sophomores.

The class of 2015 may be the stars right now - "they're the new babies," said Margaret Freije, an associate dean at Holy Cross - but



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Sarah Medina and Katie Burns, sophomores at Holy Cross, studied information on advisers and programs yesterday in Worcester.

after years of neglect, the middle children of academia are getting some attention of their own.

Sophomore year is a crucial time for students, who spend it choosing majors, study-abroad programs, and internships. In many respects, those changes are as challenging as the one students make as freshmen when they move from their parents' homes and into dorms. In response, dozens of colleges have started "sophomore year experience" programs in the last few years. Many include orientations, a concept long reserved for novice undergraduates.

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The offerings at a sophomore orientation are different and more serious than what students might get freshman year - less about helping teens figure out where they are and more about where they are going. In place of goofy team-building activities, there are sedate dinners with faculty and "major fairs," like career fairs without suits and ties.

'They're more mature, more self-confident. This is when they can come into their own.'

Esther Levine, dean of the class of 2014 at Holy Cross

"Frankly, the sophomores are already oriented. They've been here for a year," Freije said. "What we want to do is say, 'OK, you've made it through your transition. Now let's take stock.' "

Even the most pulled-together students can benefit from guidance.

"I'm a music-chemistry double major and a Russian minor, and I'm pre-med," said Natalya Krykova, secretary of the sophomore class at Holy Cross. "But I'm switching from chemistry to psych, and I need to go in and talk to the head of the psych department. I need to, like, get

it down as fast as I can. I need to have a goal."

Sophomores are also looking to have some fun. On the Facebook page for Williams College's sophomore orientation, amid the discussion of how to choose classes, there's an all-important advisory not to miss "the sheer quantity of FREE FOOD."

The sophomore slump is a real and well-documented phenomenon. Studies have shown that the second year of college is when students experience the most stress and are likely to lose interest in school. A 2009 report in the journal of the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that many sophomores were adrift in a no-man's land: not pampered like freshmen, but not advanced enough in their studies to feel connected to academic departments, as juniors and seniors do.

Campuses have taken notice.

"There's a lot of work in the student affairs field around sophomores. They're a hot topic," said Erika Lamarre, director of community living at Brandeis University. "Sophomore year is the year of turmoil."

It's also when students have to make potentially life-changing decisions. Most have to declare a major as sophomores, if they haven't already.

"Some of them come to college with very specific ideas. Maybe as freshmen they think they're going to be doctors, and then they discover they don't like science courses," said Esther Levine, dean of the class of 2014 at Holy Cross. "But as sophomores, they're more

mature, more self-confident. This is when they can come into their own.”

Choosing an adviser - another sophomore-year ritual - may be stressful, too. At Smith College, which started a sophomore orientation program in 2010, “students have a lot of anxiety around that. It feels like asking someone to the prom,” said Kate Queeney, faculty director of advising. “We’re explaining to them that if your first choice says no, maybe she just has too many students already - it’s not that she doesn’t like you.”

Add a growing array of study-abroad and internship options, and it’s no wonder some sophomores are a bit bewildered.

For transfer students, there’s yet another challenge: setting academic goals without the benefit of a first year on campus to experiment. “Many of our sophomores are new here,” said Kara Kolomitz, dean of students at Regis College, which recently introduced online tutorials and study-skill sessions for second-year students. “They already know how to live on their own. They know how to do their laundry. They don’t need an introduction to college. They need an introduction to this college.”

Sophomore programming isn’t all academic, though. Some schools build in service, as in Wheelock College’s new SophServe initiative, which will send students into a community center and to a riverbank for cleanup. Others take a more light-hearted approach. Duke University, for instance, brought in a hot-air balloon and slot machines for sophomores last year. (The students gambled with pretend money.)

Then there are the many events based on that simple, time-tested principle of college-student outreach: If you feed them, they will come. Practically every school now has some form of barbecue, dinner, or ice cream social specifically for sophomores. Suffolk University offers a cooking class for teens getting used to apartment life. And at Babson College, Gerri Randlett, a class dean, trained her golden retriever to go room-to-room in an all-sophomore dormitory delivering chocolate-coated Chex mix. "I did have to make sure no one had pet allergies first," she said.

Not everyone is a fan of sophomore orientations. When student leaders at Williams launched theirs in 2009, a classmate, Raphael Menko, wrote a column in the campus newspaper arguing that it was "a colossal waste of money and a refuge for those who want to fool themselves into thinking that they are still first-years and need the safety net and structure that intrinsically comes with freshman year."

These days, though, Menko is less miffed. "I think I was the only student who complained about it," he says. "And it was a really fun party. I still have the water bottle they gave me."

Juniors and seniors are starting to get in on the action, too. At Illinois Wesleyan University, the new weeklong sophomore orientation program has been such a hit that the upperclassmen are jealous. "We've started to hear from them: 'Hey, why isn't there one of these for us?'" says associate dean of students Darcy Greder. So the administrators are looking into doing something for the senior class. Greder says they will call it "disorientation."

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