The Ninth-Grade Challenge

Despite their increasing popularity, freshman academies might not be the best way to help students transition to high school.

If your school is experiencing the "freshman problem," welcome to the club. Across the country, high schools have found that their ninth-grade students have the highest rates of truancy, discipline referrals, failures, and retentions. A school's worst data points are usually found among freshmen.

For this reason, proactive schools seek strategies for transitioning freshmen into high school. Many of them focus on what happens before high school. Although there is nothing wrong with pre-high school efforts, such strategies are comparable to premarital counseling: it's a great idea, but young couples are going to need some additional guidance once they tie the knot.

An effective freshman transition program focuses on making the ninth-grade year itself a year of transition. If a high school properly directs its energies during that year, it is possible to lay a positive foundation for both students and a school. In fact, if a high school effectively transitions its freshmen for several years in a row, the entire culture of a building can improve. An effective program can transform a school from the bottom up.

The Essential Components
Many models for transitioning freshmen have been tried with varying degrees of success. In my work with schools across the country, I have found several key or essential components that must be present to maximize the impact of freshman transition programs:
- Make the high school a more nurturing environment where it is difficult for students to slip through the cracks
- Standardize expectations so that students know what they should do and teachers know what they should look for so that expectations can improve
- Equip students with the belief systems they need to learn and be successful
- Create classroom cultures where excellence occurs
- Teach students organizational and time-management strategies
- Foster effective parent-teacher contact

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Ensure that the teachers of freshmen grow professionally and use the latest and greatest strategies in pedagogy and technology. Recognize freshmen for their accomplishments and make them feel at home within the high school. Preemptively and proactively provide support services for students who fall behind. Those components can exist within various structures and bell schedules, but they must be there. My experience has led me to determine that the best way to ensure that they exist is within a teaming model in which a group of teachers shares a group of students.

Characteristics of Effective Programs

Although transition efforts must address the essential components of freshman transition, if a program is going to produce a desired, long-term change, it must be structured to:

- Be flexible: A school's needs change over time. Effective transition programs adjust to a school's changing needs.
- Be thrifty: Resources—rooms, teachers, class time, and money—are limited. Programs that drain too many resources will not fit well into a master schedule.
- Be positive: The school community must believe in the program. Nothing kills a program faster than dissent from within a building.
- Be effectual: The program must achieve the targeted goals.
- Be empowering: The needs of freshmen are not met by a program but by amazing teachers who teach in an environment of continuous growth and professional support.
- Be efficacious: What causes freshmen to have so many problems? The goal of a transition program is to address those needs as efficiently and effectively as possible.

I have noticed two trends in the structuring of freshman transition programs: The first trend is that many schools are using the freshman academy model to transition freshmen. The second trend is that whether or not they use the academy model, the schools that are most successful in meeting their students' needs are the ones who use a teaming model.

The Academy Model

A freshman academy is a model that separates freshmen from the general high school population. In this model, freshmen spend all or a majority of their day in or on a separate hall, wing, floor, or building. This model has its benefits, namely the fact that freshmen receive a significant amount of the school's focus, but there are schools and settings in which it is simply not the best choice.

It often seems as though the term freshman academy has become synonymous for freshman transition program. This is a mistake along the same lines as saying the word hammer is synonymous with the word tool. A hammer is a type of tool. A freshman academy is a type of freshman transition program. Just as there are more tools than hammers, there are multiple types of transition programs. I am not exactly sure where, when, or how the idea of the freshman academy first developed, but it is a mistake to assume that a school must have a freshman academy to transition freshmen into high school.

I regularly get questions from schools about problems they have encountered that are inherent in the academy model. Because academies are becoming prevalent, it is worthwhile to take a look at those problems while looking at what freshman transition strategies work best. The goal is not to get you to change your model, but to ensure that you have the information you need to make the best decision for your school.

The Teaming Model

Regardless of whether or not a school uses the academy model, teacher teams are the most effective strategy for easing the transition to high school and preparing freshmen for success. A nurturing and supportive environment is created when a team of at least four teachers, representing at least the four core subject areas, shares a group of students and meets regularly to discuss ways to meet their students' needs.

The teaming model can be employed within the academy model, but it is not dependent on that model to work. In fact, teaming can work just as well, and perhaps even better, within the traditional departmentalized school structure. This is because the teaming model can address each of the es-
sentential components of freshman transition and is a structure that meets the characteristics of a good program. The same cannot always be said for the academy model alone.

Comparing the Academy and Teaming Models
When the academy and teaming models are analyzed in light of the characteristics of a good program, it becomes apparent why schools struggling with creating a freshman academy might want to instead focus on how to implement freshman teams.

FLEXIBILITY
Longitudinal freshman data usually show that between 10% and 30% of freshmen do not exhibit the behaviors that led to a school’s desire to create a freshman transition program. Should these students be a part of the freshman transition program? That depends on the available resources, but leaving some freshmen out of an academy leads to a two-tiered school. But it is possible that in an attempt to force all freshmen into an academy, a school will end up limiting the options for some students who might not need a high level of support.

The teaming model is much more flexible. Because students do not have to be isolated, it is easier to include only the students who need to be a part of the program. Schools that choose to operate this way tend to team courses instead of students. For example, all regular levels of ninth-grade courses—as opposed to advanced sections—could be teamed. A team might therefore consist of an English 9 teacher and teachers of the school’s basic math, science, and history courses (e.g., Algebra I, Biology I, and World History). Students who choose to take some or all of those courses self-select themselves as members of the freshman transition program. Further, because all freshmen have not been “quarantined” into one portion of the building, the teaming model is better able to adjust to the physical needs of the school change over time.

RESOURCES
School leaders who are involved in creating a master schedule know how valuable teachers, rooms, and class periods—not to mention their schools’ finances—are. For some schools, the academy model makes it difficult to maximize those resources. Although I am not aware of a resource-free transition model, an academy, by virtue of its design, often creates a large drain.

For example, if all freshmen will be part of the transition program, the school will most likely need more teachers than it would if the academy did not include the freshmen who don’t exhibit freshman problems. Some teachers who are in the academy might also be needed in the rest of the building. Will sophomores and upperclassmen who need to take a freshman-level class be allowed physically into the freshman academy, or will additional resources be needed to completely isolate freshmen? Will the academy have science labs? Will money have to be spent to convert a portion of the building? What will not receive funding as a result of the decision to spend money on building or retrofitting an academy?

Teaming, on the other hand, requires very few, if any, additional resources. The teamed teachers can remain a part of their departments. The only difference is that they share a group of students and have a scheduled time during the day to meet.

PERCEIVED IMPACT
It seems as though there are individuals who complain about every single new program, idea, or initiative. Although we do not want to let the few complainers among us dictate what we are willing to try or not try, it is unwise to add perceived legitimacy to their gripes. Therefore, it is to our advantage to develop programs and initiatives that fit as seamlessly as possible into our school cultures. This is where the academy model often falls short.

Separating all freshmen into a separate hall, wing, floor, or building will have an impact on the entire school. Some teachers who are not associated with the academy have to change rooms or have their days altered. Although that alone is not reason enough to abandon the academy model, it does raise the question of whether or not “the juice will be worth the squeeze.” If the plan for improvement increases odds for complaining and griping in the building, the plan better be one that will last a long time and produce the desired results.

The teaming model usually has little to no im-
pact on faculty members who are not part of the freshman transition program. All that teaming requires is for the master scheduler to assign a group of students to a group of teachers and to then give those teachers a common planning period.

**TARGETED GOALS**

Although the essential components of freshman transition can be provided within an academy model, there is little about the model that uniquely fulfills those needs. Those components can be addressed in a school structured departmentally just as easily as they can in a school that uses the academy model.

The teaming model, however, does help schools achieve those goals. Teacher teams greatly increase the school’s ability to address any goals it has. When four teachers work collaboratively, they are able to enhance their effectiveness by “the power of four” because they benefit from one another’s strengths and reinforce the ideas and skills taught in one another’s classrooms.

**TEACHER EMPOWERMENT**

Empowering teachers can occur in any type of setting, but it is a benefit of teaming because teachers will collaborate, learn from one another, and meet daily to support students and one another. Whether a school uses an academy model or not, if it wants to make an impact on its freshmen it must first ensure that teachers are at the core.

That means that it makes sense first to figure out how to make a teaming model work. If teaming at one school can work within the academy model, then that school can consider the academy model. But if the best way to team will not work within the academy model, then forget about the academy and go with what enables teaming.

**ADDRESSES THE IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS**

A freshman transition program should be structured to deal with the causes of the freshman problem. Although an academy can be designed to do so, there is little about that structure that inherently addresses these issues.

Is being around older students the reason some freshmen have trouble? Although there could be some notable exceptions, the general answer to that question is no. In many cases, the exact opposite is true. Freshmen often behave better when they intermingle with more mature students than they do when they are quarantined.

Is the freshman problem the result of students walking across the building between classes? Again, the answer is no. Although freshmen may get into trouble in the hallways, it is difficult to see this issue being worthy of a massive restructuring.

Ninth-grade students have problems because they are at an unusual juncture in life. They must make decisions with long-term consequences, but they often lack the maturity and foresight to make those decisions well. They leave a relatively nurturing environment and come into a high school where they are easily overlooked and where they begin to slip through the cracks. That is why they benefit from teaming, which extends some of the nurturing of the middle school into the high school setting.

**Final Thoughts**

I have no desire to criticize schools that use freshman academies, but I hope to challenge the quickly emerging conventional wisdom that a school must have an academy to help freshman make a smooth transition to high school. Regardless of a school’s physical structure, teaming students and teachers is the key to incorporating the essential freshman transition components and building a program that will last long-term.

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To attend Scott Habeeb’s session at Ignite 2013, visit www.naspconference.org to register.