

ALBERT VALENCIA: Mentors ease the transition to college life
By Albert Valencia

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On Aug. 28, 21,000 students began their fall classes at California State University, Fresno. In the first week of school, a population equivalent of the city of Reedley converged near the intersection of Shaw Avenue and Highway 168 looking for parking spaces.

Scattered among the 21,000 students were 2,400 young men and women who graduated in the top third of their high school class. They applied and were accepted to Fresno State, and got up that Monday morning ready to start college for the very first time.

By and large, these young people represented the Valley's best and brightest; in their high school senior classes they were among the cream of the crop. On that Monday morning one common feature for each student was the act of leaving the comfort and familiarity of home, high school, friends and family to begin a new journey.

For some of the students this new journey will be a breeze. With the fewest possible mistakes, they will make sense of their new university life and begin to chart the course of their personal and professional future. But for many others, the journey will be filled with conflicting feelings of confusion and excitement, anxiety and happiness, and the big winner, freedom and homesickness.

Adding to the complications in the first week of classes, the 2,400 first-year students experienced a suspension of the laws related to their prior life. For example, on high school campuses routines are rigidly set to a bell schedule that signals the beginning and end of every period. Other than the beautiful set of bells housed in the carillon clock tower near the fountain, first-year students at Fresno State will not hear the familiar bells of high school; will never see yard duty monitors. No one will tell them when to study, and they will not be forced to attend class.

First-year students, particularly those who have arrived to our campus underprepared or overextended, will find that college challenges them academically, emotionally and socially.

In the worst case, students who do not feel successful may face the ultimate possibility of dropping out before completing their goals. In the best case, academic advisors, professors, friends and student service programs will see the warning signs and refer the students to one of our many intervention programs. For more than 200 students, this intervention program comes from the Mentoring

Institute, where trained university mentors are matched with first-year students.

Established in 1987, the mentoring program is older than many students. In 19 years, the program has matched hundreds of first year students with mentors who voluntarily give the gift of their time and talent to talk and listen to their assigned students. The stories that mentors frequently report about their students combine aspects of loneliness and frustration mixed with an overwhelming load of schoolwork. As the students presented the complicated narratives of their life, the good news was that the mentors once walked where the students are currently walking.

The mentors were once first-year college students themselves and through their own personal experiences, they learned how to navigate the complicated maze of university life.

In training meetings, our university mentors regularly talked about the mentors in their own life. Often, mentors paused in mid-sentence, looking away and describing someone who had played a significant role in their own personal and professional development. It did not matter if the significant person had already passed on or if they were still alive. The fact was that the significant person was still providing guidance for the person telling the story. We always knew that mentoring was a benefit to students. Yet it took 19 years to formalize a study to measure the benefits of mentoring to the mentor.

Last spring, Dr. Lynnette Zelezny, chairperson of the psychology department at Fresno State, graciously took time from her schedule to administer a confidential survey to 120 mentors. We wanted to learn, in a formal sense, about the personal benefits, costs and motivation for mentors. In other words, was mentoring worth anything to the mentor?

Guess what? The findings showed that mentors strongly agreed that the benefits of mentoring outweighed the costs. Mentors reported gaining the most satisfaction from helping others and enjoyed working with them. And, although they reported the greatest cost was time, they viewed this as an investment and not as a cost. This was great news!

Since that Monday morning in August, four Mentor Training Workshops were offered and first-year students were matched with mentors. Within days, mentors endeavored to meet with their students to begin to learn about their lives, families, expectations and, most important, about their hopes and dreams.

By the end of the academic year, mentors will have learned a great deal about their students and about themselves. And once again we will be reminded that as we help others we help ourselves and, perhaps most important, that we honor those who mentored us by mentoring others.

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