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Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education

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Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education

Johansson, C., & Felten, P. (2014).
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Reviewed by Beth K. Hale

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“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be *transformed* by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). We are all changing. We are all growing. We are all *transforming*; and it should come as no surprise to us that our students are as well. Authors and educators Charity Johansson and Peter Felten collaborate to create their description of the process of transformation as outlined in the somewhat brief pages of *Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education*.

Johansson, a professor of physical therapy, and Felten, director of the Center of Engaged Learning and associate professor of history, pick up the story of their institution, Elon University, where *Transforming a College: The Story of a Little-Known College’s Strategic Climb to National Distinction* (Keller, 2014) leaves off. The authors draw conclusions regarding transformational learning in higher education through the combination of their professional experiences at Elon University and qualitative data collected through dozens of interviews with Elon students, alumni, faculty, and staff. Their findings are further legitimized through several intentional nods to longstanding student development theorists, and a diverse collection of current best practices. Though the authors clearly describe transformational learning to be non-linear, further stating, “There is no recipe for something as serendipitous as transformation” (p. 5), the six subsequent chapters clearly describe four stages of the transformation process: disruption of a previous way of looking at the world, followed by reflective analysis of one’s

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underlying assumptions, verifying and acting on these new understandings, and finally, integrating these new ways of being into everyday life.

Inspired by Loren Pope's *Colleges That Change Lives* (Pope 2000; Pope & Oswald, 2012) and Richard Light's *Making the Most of College* (2004), Johansson and Felten assert that,

Transformational learning changes people for a lifetime. The goal of the transformative learning process in college is that students emerge with a powerful combination of knowledge, skills, and commitment; that they see the work that needs to be done, the contributions that need to be made, the things in the world that need to be changed; that they have the capacities and the confidence needed to contribute to those changes; and that they have a sense of both agency and urgency. (p. 6)

Not only does transformation change people for a lifetime, it also is a process that spans the length of a lifetime; the work of transformation is never complete. The college years, however, present a particularly prime opportunity for students to engage in the transformation process in a way that most have not yet experienced. As the book's title implies, colleges and universities promise to take students from one point, and escort them to another. According to the text, a college's role in the transformation process is to aid a student in developing his or her own idea of self; it is not to change them or merely help them mature. Johansson and Felten's interviews revealed that most students standing at the threshold of their college experience were expecting to experience something new and different, but could not anticipate the degree to which they were challenged and stretched by the variety of new and differing opinions surrounding them. This disruption, as the authors describe it, often occurs as soon as a student turns the page to begin this new chapter of his/her life. First-year students are beginning to experience a tension between what is comfortable and well-known, and the uncertainty that lies ahead.

Fundamental to the mission of higher education, transformation seeks to "challenge students' current views, guide them in the examination of their assumptions, and offer them the chance to construct an emerging sense of self and relationship with the world" (p. 2). As the facilitators of "productively disruptive experiences," student development professionals are urged to present students with both challenges, as well as opportunities to reflect critically on the beliefs, biases, and assumptions that surfaced as a result of those challenges. Theorist Nevitt Sanford would tell you that the idea of challenge and support is certainly not a new one, though it does appear to be a critical starting point for transformation.

While in college, students are both transforming and learning how to understand and continue the transformation process in the postgraduate years. Reflective analysis, both internally and externally, and active awareness of one's own transformation is critical in the furthering of this work. In external analysis, higher education professionals are able to offer critical points of reflection, perplexing questions, and valuable feedback to

supplement the internal dialogue happening within the student. It is here that we begin to see the value of transformation within the context of community. Change is beginning to occur, and is nurtured through collaboration.

Transformative learning is characterized by a deep and enduring change in thinking that is seen through changed ways of being in the world. It also generally reflects a new connection to some larger goal or purpose. Johansson and Felten contend that for learning to be transformative, reflective analysis must be followed by verification. They define verification as “action that clarifies and confirms this new way of being” (p. 64). Transformation inspires action. During this verification stage, students are taking their new ways of thinking for a test drive. They have formed a new idea, and now it is time for them to test that idea through their actions. Do these new conclusions draw them nearer to the person they hope to become? Are the outcomes of their actions resulting in positive progress? In this stage of transformation, the college atmosphere provides a practice field, replete with coaches and guides. Johansson and Felten’s interviews confirmed the importance of community during each of the phases of transformation. Mentors of all types play an essential role in the students’ developmental journey, and can come in the form of professors, student development staff, community members, and peers. These guides offer important insights and directions to these students’ new actions, which oftentimes stimulates a growing confidence, ultimately leading to sustained changes.

Transformation is not only a journey to be made by students, but by institutions as well. As with our students, our institutions should strive to grow in ways that allow them to become better versions of themselves. For the university, there is a delicate balance that comes with managing ever-present changes and a longstanding institutional mission. This work does not appear to be easy, but the authors offer their insights on the potential return on investment: “Over time and with practice, the continued integration of dissonance, honest examination, and recalibrating actions will strengthen the university’s core, representing institutional depth and soul” (p. 99). In many ways, our institutions can inspire the growth and transformation of our students through leading by example. Transformed colleges and universities challenge their community members in their own transformations, and “students’ experiences of deep and lasting changes are most likely to take place within the context of organizations that are themselves engaged in the same process” (p. 4).

At the heart of their work, the authors sought to illuminate the transformation process as seen at Elon University, and to describe the benefits of intentionally assisting students through their own transformational learning. Being that a fluid concept such as transformation is not easy to measure, the anecdotal evidences of Johansson and Felten’s study do present themes from which to draw conclusions. Openly stated, the implications found from their research are designed specifically to apply to residential colleges and universities of similar standing, as the residential model presents a prime opportunity for transformation. Though details regarding the methodology employed (sample size,

for example) are largely left to the imagination of the reader, the authors' findings and thoughtful analysis are an encouragement to all who encounter transformation, and substantiate the work of those who seek to impact the lives of others – particularly those of emerging adults. *Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education* is a quick read that provides plenty of anecdotal encouragement, and will easily earn its place on your bookshelf.

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