Preparing Students for the College Experience

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Preparing students for College life and most importantly for life beyond high school is a key challenge for many educators and secondary education institutions. Above all, today more than ever, educators must prepare students for the unknown and the unpredictable; careers not yet known to us, opportunities that we can not imagine, and for a world so different that we have no idea what it will look like in thirty or forty years. Hence some of the questions that arise are as follows: what shall we teach our students? What skills do we expect them to develop; and which processes shall we help them cultivate? We (Gialamas and Pelonis) believe that the answers deriving from the teachings of the ancient Greeks, are encompassed in the concept of “Morfosis”.

We purport that the Morfosis educational paradigm as previously defined (Pelonis & Gialamas 2009) is sustainable if it is Holistic, Meaningful and Harmonious (HMH) education. Sustainable HMH education must rely on specifically defined principles and values which enhance the concept of living a full life with ethos, as dictated by the ancient Greeks.

In particular, Holistic means understanding and successfully combining academic, emotional, physical, intellectual and ethical components to ensure a healthy, balanced individual; an individual who can successfully cope with the changes involved when entering higher education as well as the changes that life brings

Meaningful is related to being in line with ones principles and values and with ones personal and professional goals. Thus the educational experience must be meaningful for the learner. The learner should see it as part of his/her life and isolated form academic knowledge. In addition it must be meaningful in relation to his/her dreams, strengths, desires and talents. Discovering the feeling of being “in love with life and learning” gives life meaning and thus there is a personal interest in making “living” desirable.

Harmonious is connected to the idea that all human dimensions must be in harmony. In other words emotions, intelligence and intellect must be harmonically integrated. Similar to an orchestra, working in harmony with the conductor is essential. The learner like the conductor helps all parts stay in harmony. He/she, in turn, is the analytical thinker, reflector, mentor, teacher and servant. In other words he/she is the decision maker.

Morfosis is likely to lay the foundation for success in higher education and more importantly, for life itself because it is all encompassing. As we are well aware teaching and learning does not only take place in the classroom, but in the playground, during activities, in assemblies, during group projects and in both team and individual sports. The seeds planted during the early years produce fruits that will eventually blossom and continue to grow in higher education. To adopt, and implement such an educational paradigm academic institutions need leaders who embrace and apply the analogous leadership philosophy. The evolution of this philosophy came about from the Leadership as a Partnership with Agreeable Flexibility model, as defined by S. Gialamas and S. Hilintzaris (2006). Furthermore, defined within this model is the Personal Leadership Identity (PLI) (Gialamas, 2008) a factor necessary to accomplish the feat that will lead to future success for students. This model
eventually led to the Morfosis Leadership paradigm as defined by S. Gialamas and P. Pelonis (2009). The Morfosis Leadership Paradigm is defined by the following three components:

a. Leadership

Leadership is the continuous act of influencing oneself and others to accomplish personal and professional goals in life

b. Know Thyself

1. Identify, and clarify ones Principles and Values
2. Define clearly ones professional goals in life
3. Recognize and internalize ones personal goal in life

b. Adhere to a Collective Leadership Partnership Approach

1. Develop a team by establishing a partnership relationship among the leader and the team members based on common Principles and Values, and similar personal and professional goals in life
2. The partnership relationship establishes a well defined distribution of authority and decision making among the leader and the members of the team not necessarily equally
3. The distribution is clearly defined including the type, magnitude and areas of the decision authority that is given to the team members
4. The leader supports, promotes and encourages team members to use their decision making authority
5. Periodically the leader and the team members reflect on the partnership and adjust, modify, upgrade and may even remove some or all of the authority of team members

As we look at primary and secondary education, one of the most fundamental questions being asked is how many of the skills acquired during those years really are necessary and sufficient to ensure student success in college? What knowledge is transferable? Are students able to apply the knowledge in different situations, utilize it in order to make educated decisions or to provide solutions to challenges they face as they move from one culture to another? How well do we indeed understand student learning styles? And how difficult is it for Colleges and Universities to train their faculty and staff to provide bridging skills for young people during their time of transition?

Indeed for primary educators the challenge is not only to provide an exciting, relevant and meaningful curriculum to their students but they must also make all efforts to understand the secondary curriculum and to align all efforts. Likewise, secondary education teachers must understand primary curriculum and must agree as to the type of skills necessary to be developed in primary school that will eventually transfer to middle school and will ensure the success of students at all levels.

To the same end secondary educators and administrators, must not only focus on understanding the strengths and talents of their students so as to provide the best possible curriculum and learning opportunities but they must also understand the higher education environment. Their task is also to prepare students to succeed in their transition to College education and endow them with strong tools which will not only give them a ticket to higher educational institutions, but will secure their success. Similarly, faculty and administrators of higher education institutions focus on analogous goals for their institutions, and rightly so.

Thus, if we are committed to taking education to the next level, to uniting the best of both worlds, we must build a bridge between these worlds. We can only do so by learning from the past, observing the present and using this knowledge to prepare for the future. There is therefore a need to internalize, and
adopt a philosophy which requires integrating acquired knowledge by the learner with his /her strengths, talents and a desires to live a meaningful life. We cannot assume that students will automatically know how to apply the skills acquired in elementary and secondary education during their higher education journey. Similarly, we cannot assume that the best of professors and teaching methods will ensure student success.

The bridging method proposed requires a reciprocal understanding of both worlds by both entities. Students are guided, at best, in high school, to do what is necessary to meet the required criteria of the desired higher educational institution. As the students gets closer to the last two years of their high school career, the focus switches to achieving the necessary grades, test scores, oh and… yes… enough extra curricular activities to provide a great package for college acceptance.

Our more than 50 years collective experience in higher education (undergraduate and graduate) leaves no doubt that the most successful student entering college is the student that is happy with the institution, the location, as well as the subject they have chosen. What then ensures a happy student? It is making sure that there is a match made in heaven; a perfect fit. This involves three prerequisites: 1) to know the student academically, intellectually, emotionally, and ethically, 2) To understand the student’s personal and professional goals in life, and 3) To know the higher education institution. Knowing the student as a whole means collecting information and putting pieces of the puzzle together that will create a picture of who the student really is, what are their strengths and weaknesses, what life experiences have influenced their thinking, how do they cope with challenging, unforeseen and even successful circumstances, what interests do they have outside of academics, what values do they uphold, what are their limitations (S. Gialamas and P.Pelonis 2009). This approach is what we have referred to previously as the “Holistic” approach; it secures the integration of developing a strong academic foundation, emotional stability and strategies to cope with internal and external pressure, together with a the physical well being of the individual enhanced and enriched with strong principles and values. An individual who will successfully cope with the changes involved when entering higher education as well as the changes that life brings. (Pelonis, 2002). Indeed the ancient Greek philosophers paved the way by embracing, promoting and studying at length the idea of educating the “whole” person; an idea encompassed in the words of Socrates “Know Thyself”. The current American educational system is based on a multidimensional and flexible, with certain boundaries, educational approach taking in consideration student diversity to ensure and capitalize on every student’s interests and abilities. To achieve the end result of understanding the student holistically, all entities of an academic institution must be active participants. It means engaging teachers, receiving frequently feed back regarding academic development of their students, administrators regarding behaviour, coaches regarding athletics, advisors regarding extra-curricular activities, counsellors regarding coping abilities and possible adverse personal experiences, parents regarding family dynamics and expectations, peers regarding personality and students themselves regarding interests, future goals and life dreams.

Meaningful is closely related with the principles and values each student consciously or unconcieously adopts, embraces, and guards. These are influenced by family, friends, culture, community, religious beliefs, and naturally the media and the entertainment industry. In particular, the easy access to technology, the media and the entertainment industries influence is very strong toward the youth as they form their identity and adopt their principles and values in this globalized society. Professional and Personal goals in life are often shaped by the glamorous images with which young people are
bombarded constantly by the media and entertainment industry. Therefore it requires more effort and intensity from educators to provide a realistic picture of life and expose students to future opportunities which are in line with universal principles and values. (Saligman, 2007)

The educational experience must be meaningful for each learner, according to one’s strengths, talents and dreams… The learner should internalize that the knowledge, skills, principles and values obtained are the defining ingredients of his/her life trajectory; all integrate and define who the learner is and what signature he/she will leave in his/her life’s journey. Understanding how to combine the beauty of life, the desire to make a difference in one’s life and the lives of others as well as the love of continuous learning will establish the strong desire to “enjoy life” and will make “living enjoyable”.

Harmonious necessitates that all dimensions must be coordinated and synchronized. Similar to a music piece which is the product of sounds from several instruments under the guidance of the composer, such is the leadership of the conductor. The composer is the designer of each student’s curriculum and the conductor is the collective effort of faculty, counsellors, staff, and administrators. All members of the team work in harmony with one common goal; helping the student to achieve his/her dream… This also means that in addition to academics various aspects of the HMH become the focus at different times and for a specific purpose. There are times when it is necessary for academics to be the centre of attention while at other times it is athletics or other activities.

Finally, education must be sustainable; therefore, it cannot only be based on acquiring skills and learning a trade but must be based on critical thinking, being creative and sharpening decision-making skills. Most importantly, all of the above must rely on one’s defined principles and values in order to enhance the concept of living a full life and sustaining ethos, as defined by the ancient Greeks.

ACS Athens adopts, endorses, embraces and promotes the Morfosis model of education for its students. It also demands that faculty, administration and staff be the example through their behaviour and daily actions. Students as early as freshman year are guided to begin thinking about creating an individual and well rounded portfolio which we call: Portfolio: All about Me (PAAM). The portfolio includes multidimensional data of student’s personality, character, and academic actions. The process of acquiring the information inspires the students to understand themselves better by seeing the “whole” picture of who they are. Thus, the learning process and the learner become one. Students are reflectors, creators, and decision makers. (Gialamas, S, Peloni, S, P. 2009). During the development of the individual PAAM, the college advisor observes the process with which each student approaches the formation of the portfolio. Counsellors continuously guide students to engage in phase of life reflections, that is, reflections of middle and primary school which include highlights of memories students have regarding these time periods and which have greatly contributed to who they are today. As students engage in this process of becoming while completing all components of the PAAM, counsellors are able to better understand the personality of each student and in particular their strengths and weaker areas. Therefore the PAAM becomes the reflective tool of who the students is regarding academics, behaviour, extra-curricular activities, personal interests and future goals. In this sense the process compliments the Morfosis philosophy by allowing the student to engage in a holistic, meaningful and harmonious representation of his/her personality.

The second prerequisite in preparing students for college life encompasses an in depth understanding of the higher educational institutions to which the student is planning to apply. This means investing time and energy, not only to research colleges, understand programs and highlight admissions criteria,
but it means getting to know the institution by getting to know its people. Thus, developing a truthful and meaningful relationship with its representatives is a vital step. Truthful relationships ensure that the information exchanged between higher education institutions, schools and students is accurate. Both constituents, the representative of the secondary school and the higher education institution, represent their consecutive schools accurately and honestly. While the college advisor, principal, administrator does not overestimate nor underestimate student strengths, abilities and needs, so too the university representative gives an accurate picture of the institution’s requirements, as well as the institutions ability to meet the needs of the particular students. (Gialamas, S. Pelonis, P. 2009). Therefore the focus is to find the best college for the students and for the college to identify a student who will succeed in their environment. We call this approach establishing Bilateral Institutional Credibility (BIC).

One type of students in great need of such guidance when called to choose the best fit college is the international student. This student needs to feel comfortable, secure, and confident with the information provided as he/she prepares to immerse him/herself into an unfamiliar system, with unfamiliar faces and customs. Thus, information regarding such activities as orientation, care of students during holidays or even such issues as financial aide, which may seem like common sense to one familiar with such systems ensure the emotional well being of students and makes their life more predictable and manageable.

While it is important to collect information via the websites, publications and alumni, nothing can replace the personal understanding of the environment within the institution. This then, can only be achieved with a meaningful visit to the institution itself. No amount of information received will replace “the feel” one gets by being on the grounds, attending a class or two, talking with students and faculty, seeing the facilities and experiencing the approach with which they are received. But many international students do not have the ability to visit higher institutions and must then rely on their counsellor to provide the most accurate picture possible. Then accurately matching the student with the institution becomes a science as well as an art; it is as much intuitive as it is calculating. Counsellors or other members of the high school must visit and understand clearly the college they visit including its mission, educational philosophy, services, and environment and most important the human factor that ultimately makes the difference. Upon their return to their institutions they must reflect on the information they have acquired, and most importantly their holistic experience and take time to reflect on the students so as to further revise and improve the process of achieving the right match and ensuring student success.

The last piece to the puzzle involves the establishment of a transitional tool between the high school and college experience. There are a variety of ways to do this. In cities at which universities are accessible to high school student’s agreements and relationships could be established so that high school student could take college courses, or college professors could teach courses at high schools, or both institutions can engage in other joint programs. The goal for such relationships is to ensure continuation in the educational process and also ensures that the student transfers the skills and knowledge obtained in the K-12 environment to the higher education institution.

One such tool is the Institute of Creative and Critical Thinking (ICCT) which it was formed in 2006 at ACS Athens. The ICCT provides to its students the forum through which a holistic preparation for college life takes place. The Institute not only offers college level courses with the collaboration of
colleges and universities worldwide, but also provides programs for students to visit higher education institutions, engage in research projects with college professors, and experience joint teaching between high school faculty and college professors thus students have the opportunity to taste college life. During the process of establishing relationships with higher educational institutions, the secondary school administrators have the opportunity to identify and selectively choose institutions according to size, location and focus (Business, Art, or Liberal Art schools) depending on student interest trends. Faculty from these higher education institutions are invited to teach college level courses on the high school campus during a two-three week intensive period. No grades are assigned to students and thus teaching methods are flexible, as long as an atmosphere of college level seriousness and rigor is promoted. The institute’s goal is to familiarize students with college level teaching, while the college professors get to know their potential clients better.

The courses taught either by university professors or by qualified high school faculty or jointly, provide students with a better understanding of the expectations in higher education. Students become familiar with the academic rigor, the thinking process, the intellectual level, and the form of communication between professors with students. All of these take place in a non-threatening atmosphere, allowing students to make mistakes and learn from the experience. This then minimizes, and often annihilates the fear of failure. Students are free to explore and enhance learning styles while building confidence. International students in particular are able to take initiatives and experience first hand what they have only seen in the movies. Since grades are not an issue, students have no need to be competitive and to strive to achieve external requirements for success.

The professor, on the other hand, has an opportunity to get to know the high school student as a learner. By observing and reflecting on the learning, they are better able to understand how to work with young people. They can see first hand the youngsters’ reactions, fears, anxieties and goals. As they are not constrained by grades nor bound by exams, the real focus is on understanding the learner. Teaching then is not a generic method mainly derived at by the professor’s style and personality alone, rather it reflects an understanding of the students and of the group dynamics. Teaching from different angles allows room for experimentation which may result in implementing some of the new strategies tried, back to the higher educational institution.

Building this institutional connection is a win-win situation for both the secondary school as well as the higher education institution. Most importantly, students reap the benefits and solidify the skills and knowledge obtained thus far, in order to ensure success, by moving into higher level education with more confidence in their abilities, and less fear of the unknown. They are able to focus on their internal, personal process of learning, strengthening the already acquired skills of their secondary education, while reflecting upon and revising their approach to learning. Furthermore, students also bridge the gap between themselves and the professor. They are able to engage in the learning easier, while approaching their instructor without hesitation for clarification and guidance.

In conclusion, education is a continuous act of not only acquiring skill, knowledge, solving problems, but also a way of learning and making educated decisions in academic establishments but most important in life. In this journey the transition form one environment to another must be smooth, as painless as possible and meaningful in a holistic way. Therefore for the benefit of both type of institutions, secondary and higher, we must establish, avenues and tools for helping our students to transition. Creating a continuum that will smooth transitions between levels is vitally important if we are to ensure
better success and well being of the student. Continuum requires that secondary education leaders at all levels are open-minded, innovative in their teaching, creative in their approach and seek continuous and open communication with colleagues in higher education.

Higher education leaders on the other hand, make it a point to understand secondary education leaders. They become available to exchange ideas, and to inspire them in order to best prepare students not only to succeed in higher education but to become productive and influential members of society. It is indeed a two way commitment with both ends reaping the benefits from the seeds they plant.

As travellers between the two worlds, secondary and university education, we find it refreshing and inspiring to work with colleagues; leading educators on both ends of the spectrum that have the same goals; to teach, inspire and guide students to be the best that they can be. It is only natural then that we would want to see these two worlds unite in an effort to take education to another level. The Holistic, Meaningful, and Harmonious connection between the two worlds, we are convinced, will not only produce better learners but better teachers as well. There is no better example then of Morfosis in action.

Further Reading

- Adair, John (2003), the Inspirational Leader. UK: Cogan Page Ltd.
Practice’, edited by Mary Hayden and Jeff Thompson.

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