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College Media in the Classroom: An Innovative Approach to College Preparation

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ABSTRACT

College preparation programs are ubiquitous among secondary schools, ranging from bridge programs and summer camps to STEM competitions. High school students have many options in preparing for the academic pressures of higher education. However, an area often neglected in college preparation programs is the teaching of interpersonal customs and norms of university life. High school students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may enter college with little to no understanding of the social and organizational expectations of being a college student. This study tests a college preparation approach that utilizes college-themed media as a way to educate students on college life that is unintimidating and enjoyable. Six high school students were presented with various forms of fictional college story plotlines, including a movie, two television shows, and a novel. Through observational data and semi-structured interviews, findings showed that the students identified some valuable personal lessons about what it means to be a college student after consuming the media. The findings suggest that incorporating college media into college preparation programs in high school may provide a more holistic college preparation experience by demystifying college stereotypes and relieving some of the pressures that high school students face about what is waiting for them in college.

KEYWORDS

College preparation; media exposure; first year experience; college planning; college transition

Educators at both the secondary and post-secondary levels create a variety of programs to prepare students academically and socially for college life to encourage healthy college behaviors (Terrion and Daoust 2011; Turner and Thompson 2014). Since the first year of college often results in the highest attrition rates among students (Tinto 1999; Daempfle 2003; Fike and Fike 2008), these programs are crucial for degree completion and student success. Student engagement in college has shown to be a strong predictor of first year student persistence and retention (Kuh et al. 2008). Students who are more actively engaged in college tend to be better problem solvers and perform better both inside and outside the classroom (D’Zurilla and Sheedy 1992). However, many students who enter college have a difficult time adjusting to college life outside the classroom and, as a result, drop out within their first year (Garza and Landeck 2004; Roberts and Styron 2010).

One reason for high student attrition could be due college expectations and perceptions formed by students prior to entering college. These expectations can come from various sources, such as speakers in high school, parent or sibling experiences, college tours, and college fairs. Recent research has also attributed college media as a major source in helping students develop mental images of colleges and universities (Tobolowsky 2001; Wasylkiw and Currie 2012; Reynolds 2014). College media can be accessed through the use of movies, television shows, novels, advertising, and more recently, social networking.

This can create a challenge for educators at secondary institutions attempting to holistically prepare students for college life. STEM competitions, university summer camps, and bridge programs can only go so far to teach students the social, organizational, and cultural impacts of being a college student. Through media, students are learning about college based on the shows

and movies they watch and the novels they read. This can result in students imitating behaviors from these fictional works, choosing them over the guidance provided by educators. This study uses an innovative college preparation approach by utilizing fictional college media with a group of high school students to see how they internalize the messages they consume.

Methodology

The study was conducted through a series of case study interviews. A case study has a variety of meanings and can take on a variety of forms, but Patton (2002) stated that the case study contains a detailed and rich story about a person, organization, event, campaign, or program. The case study consisted of an interview with six high school students, followed by the showing of various forms of fictional college media with observation data, which was then followed by another round of interviews. This unique set of experiences formed the “case” which was then used to frame the analysis.

The process consisted of a first round of interviews, followed by a group movie night where I showed them the movie *Rudy*, which is about a disadvantaged student working his way into joining the university’s football team. They were then given two TV show episodes to take home and watch and a book to take home and read. The TV shows were selected episodes of *Gilmore Girls* and *A Different World*. *Gilmore Girls* is a show about a young woman and her close relationship with her mother. The episode shown to the students was one where the female protagonist goes to college for the first time and her challenges trying to adjust. *A Different World* is a sitcom released in the 1980s about a historically Black college. The episode I chose to show them was about a student’s dilemma in choosing classes for the next semester, while another student struggled with a new college roommate. The book that was selected for reading was *Halls of Ivy*. *Halls of Ivy* is a mystery novel about a group of students and their challenges adjusting to their first year of college.

The criteria for the media chosen included minimal to no use of “traditional” college-media

stereotypical activities, such as binge drinking, drug use, or attending parties. There have been studies in the past that have used these types of films and described how students interpreted the lessons from them (Wasylikiw and Currie 2012). Although these activities do take place on college campuses, the goal of this study is to expand to other “staples” of college life that are rarely shown in the media. For example, the movie *Rudy* highlights the difficulty of rejection when one does not get into the school they want and the feeling of imposter syndrome once they do get into the school. *Gilmore Girls* focuses on finding the right balance of parental involvement in a student’s transition to college. *A Different World* highlights the difficulty in picking the right classes and learning to live with a difficult roommate. *Halls of Ivy* deals with the challenge of befriending students from different cultures, backgrounds, and holding different beliefs. These fictional works will likely showcase aspects of college to which the participants have not been previously exposed, neither in real life nor in media.

After consuming these sources of college media, they were interviewed a second time and asked a second set of questions reflecting on their experiences. There were a total of six participants in the study (using pseudonyms and self-identified descriptions of themselves): Paige, the pragmatist; Sally May, the outsider; Lane, the laborer; Chicksgirl, the social butterfly; Vanessa, the scholar; and Jett, the straight shooter. Five of the students went to the same high school and were acquainted with each other. The sixth student (Jett) was home-schooled for the previous two years.

Results

My interviews and observations with the six participants allowed me to create the above six case studies to represent each of their voices and narratives. Once the case studies were completed, I performed a cross-case analysis in an effort to look for any consistent themes throughout their stories both before and after viewing the college movies and shows and reading the novel. Five themes were found across all the participants, which will be discussed below.

“I don’t watch live TV”

Three of the six students mentioned that they rarely watched live television, opting instead for streaming services such as Netflix or Hulu. When asked about the amount of TV she watched, Vanessa told me that she watched it on her own time. “I don’t watch live TV. I just don’t have time. I watch a lot of Netflix. I, uhh, like to watch musicals and comedies and stuff like that.”

Chicksgirl and Paige also described the use of streaming services to watch TV shows and movies, explaining that they generally are not home enough to watch a TV show consistently when it airs live. Lane, Sally May, and Jett did not describe their source where they get their media. However, their media consumption was generally considered lower than the others.

“I don’t have time”

Five of the six participants focused on how busy they were and how it limited their time in watching movies or TV shows. Sally May summarized it best: “I probably only watch two hours of anything a week. I don’t have time to do anything else, cause I have honors homework to do, I always have drumline to do, or I have work.”

This sentiment was repeated by the other participants, although for different reasons. Paige, Sally May, and Lane all found themselves busy because of work. Paige, Sally May, and Vanessa also focused a lot on studies and schoolwork which kept them busy. Chicksgirl, while busy as well, tended to focus more on her social responsibilities.

I am so busy I don’t have time. And it kinda gets boring watching movies by yourself. So it’s just kinda like ‘oh cool a movie’. Unless, I’m more of a social person, like, so I like to spend a lot of time going to the movie and stuff even though the movie is really expensive. But, so, I mean, yeah.

Busy meant different things to different people, but the commonality that I found here is that high school students find themselves to be very short on time. To me, this was a surprise, as there is generally more of an expectation that high school students have plenty of free time.

Only Jett, the homeschooled student, seemed to have plenty of time to engage in his interests.

“College is gonna be tough”

The next theme that was apparent across all participants is the belief that college will be very difficult. Chicksgirl summarized best the feelings of the six participants regarding what college will be like:

I think that once I get to college, I won’t be as nervous as I am now, because I’ll be more prepared for it. And so, I think I’ll just ... I won’t be ... as wound up about it, like ‘oh my gosh, there are gonna be so many new people there’ and I have no idea who they are or anything. And so, I think that, I know college is gonna be tough so ... [laughs]

I found it interesting that all the students shared this sentiment, because a large number of college movies are known for downplaying the role of academics in college life, instead focusing on the “more fun” and “easier” aspects of college life. Perhaps this has to do with the movie-watching experience of these students. When asked about the college movies they have watched, not a single participant mentioned famous college movies such as *Animal House* or TV shows such as *Greek*. The shows, books, and movies they engaged with in the study were also more academically oriented, all showing the struggles that the protagonist faced in regards to schoolwork. It is important to note, however, that these college expectations were shared before showing them any of the college media, so they had these beliefs coming into the first interview.

The participants were concerned about classes and keeping their grades up. Vanessa best summarized a struggle that most students shared with me during their interviews. “[It will be difficult] trying to keep my grades up, mostly in math. But, math and history are not my strong-suits. Grades will probably be a big problem.”

“Knowing more makes things less stressful in general”

The above quote was from Jett when asked about the educational aspects of media. He said that learning about the fictional characters in the

media I provided him addressed some concerns he had about college, like learning about what an RA (Resident Advisor) was and being able to ask them for help.

Participants' opinions tended to agree with Jett's regarding the educational value of college-themed media. Lane's answers were short and simple, but they also summarized this best: "[College movies] probably teach you how to prepare for college. Like what's gonna happen and what you can probably go into, stuff like that."

Similar to Jett, Lane believed that the lessons taught in college media were helpful for understanding college better. When asked to explain what college movies have taught her, if anything, Paige said not to "let other people influence you, unless it's like a good, positive influence, because negative people and negative energy is not good and it will just drag you down, and you'll have to work a lot more and harder to get where you want to be."

Sally May had a different opinion. She believed that the shows, movie, and book I showed her had very little educational value and that she did not learn anything about college she did not already know. I asked her if she believed that college movies and shows could potentially be used to teach people about college. She said that it is possible, but not the way that it was done in the shows and movie she watched.

"You want to make friends"

Lastly, the importance of friendship was a recurring theme among four of the six participants. Paige, Chicksgirl, Vanessa, and Jett all talked about the importance of having friends in college. Vanessa said that "you want to make friends because you don't want to be like the 'lone Latinas'." The "lone Latinas" were two characters in the *Halls of Ivy* book who were secluded from the rest of the campus. They were shy and unwilling to branch out and make friends with others. Vanessa explained her fear of being labeled as a loner and that having friends was important. However, she also said that one should have friends but to "also try to keep some time for yourself," understanding the balance between socialization and personal space.

Chicksgirl also believed that college was a great place for social engagement. Like Vanessa, Chicksgirl valued her friendships. The difference between Chicksgirl and Vanessa was that Chicksgirl put higher value on friends than on schoolwork or other things. Her answers would generally revolve around her friends and her interactions with them.

Discussion

Despite the differing personalities between the participants, they generally agreed that the media provided taught them something about college. The lessons learned by the participants, however, varied based on what the participants valued. Paige and Lane, for example, found value in the protagonist's perseverance in *Rudy* and it inspired them to work hard in college to achieve their goals. Both participants are pragmatic and hard workers, so it made sense that they found value in a movie about an underdog working hard to achieve his goal.

Vanessa focused more on the social aspects of the shows and the book. Vanessa also valued the friendships of the two Latina students in *Halls of Ivy*, but learned that one must learn to branch out from their own circles in college. Chicksgirl also emphasized the social aspects and relationships of the college-themed movies she watched.

Jett found value in aspects of college that he was not previously aware of before. He said he did not know about the existence or role of Resident Advisors in college, and felt they were a valuable resource for students struggling in college. He also noticed that college provided more time between classes to do homework and engage in hobbies, which he appreciated.

Sally May did not find much value in any of the media I provided her. She felt that the colleges presented were "unrealistic" and not what real colleges are like. When asked what she thought a real college was like, she described to me what I would define as a vocational school, specializing in one particular area with hands-on teaching. It seemed that Sally May's idea of college was different from the type of colleges depicted in the media provided, which were traditional, four-year residential universities. It

seemed that Sally May was looking for something more nontraditional.

The students seemed to learn lessons from the media that reinforced beliefs they already had about college. If they valued a particular aspect of college prior to the study, they tended to focus on those aspects in the media and were more likely to learn lessons related to those areas. This supports the literature that students are likely to reinforce their own beliefs in the media they consume (Tobolowsky 2001). The majority of the participant responses also support the literature that media can influence consumer attitudes based on what they watch (Wasylikiw and Currie 2012; Williams 1986).

The key finding from these interviews, however, was the importance for these students to make a connection with the characters they encountered in the media. The strongest lessons they learned involved their comparison with a particular character's struggle throughout the story. By being a passive consumer, they were able to get to know a fictional character and see how they handled a strange and new situation. This allowed the students to reflect on how they would handle the same situation if provided with the particular set of obstacles. This type of reflection is difficult to replicate through a college tour or a college preparation program. The student needs to be convinced that they should care about what happens to a character before they can sympathize with said character and reflect on the choices made.

One limitation of this study involves the lack of group discussion after watching the movies and reading the novels. Due to time constraints and scheduling conflicts, the participants were only able to meet individually for their follow-up interview. A group conversation could have aided the participants in deepening and broadening their views on college after consuming the media. This would be a great addition to explore in a future study involving the consumption of college media and the lessons learned.

Implications and conclusion

The lack of exposure to college media and the students' fear of college may suggest a gap that can be filled through the use of college preparation programs. One of the strongest benefits of

college media is that it allows viewers to see a visual representation of college life, even if it is a fictional setting. Teachers may help to reduce the stress of fearing a difficult college environment by showing intentionally-selected movies or TV episodes where students successfully navigate a college environment and succeed academically in their classes. Another suggestion is to add a college-themed novel to the list of summer reading options for students to read and then discuss. The amount of college-themed media available is large and varied, allowing for the selection of works that target the specific population of students needing college preparatory assistance. Community colleges, regional universities, research universities, and private institutions are all represented in the growing number of college television shows, movies, and novels. Most recently, *Monster's University* by Pixar is a movie that introduces university life through a family friendly animation feature film. Future programs should attempt to use these works of fiction for an innovative educational purpose and develop tools to assess their learning outcomes. They can serve as a valuable supplement to traditional college preparatory programs.

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