

HELPING STUDENTS TO EMBRACE THEIR NEW PLACE

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

This summer, as we prepare to welcome our incoming fall classes, educators at every level can benefit from thinking about moments of transition — and how to make the move to a new classroom a positive experience for our students.

At the college level, students are often literally changing address, moving geographically from home to campus, whether they travel a few miles or several time zones away. Younger grades are similarly marked with transitions from one school building to another, whether at the borders of kindergarten to first grade, elementary to middle school, or eighth grade to high school. Transitions are rites of passage, and they present possibilities and challenges for learners at all levels.

I was fortunate to attend a panel discussion on college transitions at the recent conference of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and I came away with food for thought that will guide my preparation to welcome my students this fall.

During that panel, Bryce Bunting, assistant dean at Brigham Young University, argued that it is important for educators to move from a mindset of “transition as induction” to “transition as becoming.”



Rather than overwhelming our new students with presentations about procedures, rules, and guidelines, it is key for us to remember that transitions are when students actively — although perhaps unconsciously — decide whether and how they belong. These are not just annual rituals for us as educators, nor are they routine moments for students as they pass through. We need to engage students in active learning, meaning-making, and problem-solving from the very beginning of their time with us and with their peers.

Bunting and his fellow panelists reminded us that fostering individual connections can be a key factor that helps students feel they belong in a new place. These connections can be with us as their professors, teachers, advisers, and mentors, as well as with peers, as they encounter fellow students who may hail from a wider range of backgrounds than were present in their prior settings, especially if they are moving from high school into college. Encouraging students to participate actively in transitions means supporting them toward authentic,

relational, empowering, and future-facing learning that invites their contributions and honors their agency.

Most of all, we need to bear in mind that it is a privilege to work with students as they navigate these changes and challenges, even though it can sometimes be exhausting. Remember that they are probably facing more than they can comfortably share, and are often renegotiating family roles, identities, or future paths, all while they sit in our classrooms or offices or Zoom rooms.

As educators, we have learned that change can be exciting, and helping our students to find connections with us, and with one another, can give them entry into meaningful transformations as they move forward.



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