THE EXISTENTIAL STUDENT: UNDERSTANDING TODAY’S HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

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Abstract

Today’s higher education students are diverse in many ways – culture, age, gender, socio-economic background, education, and life experiences. Additionally, they arrive at university with varying degrees of preparation, support, and commitment to higher education. One way to help understand students and their experience in higher education is through existential philosophy. Existentialism is a philosophy of human existence which provides key insights into the individual and his/her experience with life. There are many existential concepts but four themes are especially applicable to today’s students – facticity, situatedness, choice, and alienation. These themes provide a philosophical lens which highlights that students are at various starting points, under great pressure to fit into society, worried about making the wrong education and career choices, and struggling with feelings of alienation. These philosophical insights can be used by universities to develop strategies to enhance the student experience and increase student success.

Keywords: Higher education, student success.

1 INTRODUCTION

‘Whether we want to become good parents, teachers, artists, firefighters or just decent people, life can have meaning if we strive to be who we want to be by doing what is necessary to become that person’ [1: p. 116].

Who am I? What do I want? How should I live? These are the existential questions we face throughout our lives but especially so when we are at a crossroads in our lives and trying to decide which way to go. This is the situation university students find themselves in as they try to figure out their lives and discover their future.

Today’s university students are diverse in many ways but, most importantly, they arrive at university with varying degrees of ability and commitment to pursue higher education. Some are very well-prepared and have the key skills needed for higher education study while many others are not. Some are totally committed to attaining a university degree and the multi-year investment of time and money while others attend for other reasons. Many have been pressured to attend university by family members or teachers, or simply because they see no other viable option. As a result, the transition from high school to university can be problematic and many students have a negative experience with higher education. Universities are struggling to address this challenge, but the higher education experience is multifaceted, and “Student attrition and retention are complex phenomena with many root causes” [2: p. 14].

One way to increase our understanding of today’s students and the challenges they face in higher education is through Existential philosophy. Existentialism ‘attempts to understand how events in life fit into a larger context...involves the process of creating and discovering meaning, which is facilitated by a sense of coherence (order, reason for existence) and a sense of purpose (mission in life, direction)’ [3: p. 1). There are many existential concepts but four specific themes seem to be especially helpful in understanding today’s students, and paint a picture of the “existential student.” The concepts of facticity, situatedness, choice, and alienation provide insight into the problems that occur when students are, respectively, at very different starting points from one another, under great pressure to fit in to an ever-changing society, worried about making the wrong education and career choices, and struggling with feelings of alienation.

I will first outline the situation of today’s students in higher education, then explain the four existential themes, and then discuss the strategic implications for universities.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW – HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education has become increasingly in demand in North America and now attracts a wide variety of students who are diverse in many ways – culture, age, gender, socio-economic background, education, and life experiences [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10].

The majority of students are the Millennial generation or Generation Y (born 1982 – 2000), known as the ‘connected’ generation [11, 12, 13, 14]. The Millennial generation are questioning the benefits of a university degree and the relevance of the curriculum. Most students regard the purpose of university to be getting a needed credential, i.e., job training [15], however they believe professors to be “out of touch” with their generation [16]. ‘Many students view their professors as ivory-tower types who do not know what it is like in the trenches’ [16: p. 213].

Most significantly, students arrive at university with varying degrees of preparation, support, and commitment to higher education [17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22]. It has been suggested that there is now a new lifestage, ‘emerging adulthood’, which goes from the late teens to at least the mid-twenties which means that adulthood is delayed. “Instead of entering adult roles of marriage, parenthood, and stable work shortly after high school, as most young people did in 1976, today most wait until at least their late 20s to make these transitions” [23: p. 89]. For many students, the transition from high school to university is a difficult one resulting in confusion, anxiety and stress [24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33].

All of these factors mean that universities are struggling with myriad issues affecting their organizational efficacy: retention, relevance and higher mental health needs in a system designed in a bygone era. “Students are flocking to college because the world is more complex, turbulent, and more reliant on knowledge than ever before. But educational practices invented when higher education served only the few are increasingly disconnected from the needs of contemporary students [34: p. viii]. Today’s higher education students are more confused than ever as the world is more complex than in the past and as they try to understand their role in the world, and choose a meaningful existence. Therefore, it is more important than ever to understand today’s students and their experience throughout higher education.

3 METHODOLOGY

One method that can be used to help understand today’s students is Existential philosophy as it provides a lens through which we can view the dilemmas and challenges of human existence. Existentialism is a philosophy of human existence focused on the individual which can arguably be traced back to Socrates with the statement, ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ Existential philosophy provides compelling insights into the nature of the individual self, the circumstances and dilemmas of everyday life, and in particular, it gives us a way to view the creation of individual meaning, i.e., the authentic life in existential terms. It has been described as a way to interpret the predicament or dilemma of people in modern Western society and the resulting anxiety and anguish [35, 36]. Golomb [37: p. 200] notes, ‘the existential question today is not whether to be or not to be, but how one can become what one truly is.’ There are many existential themes that have been interpreted and used in varying ways to explain the individual’s experience with life, but four specific themes seem to be especially applicable in understanding today’s students – facticity, situatedness, choice, and alienation.

Firstly, existentialism highlights our facticity, the basic facts of our lives to date such as where we were born, how we were raised, physical attributes, and past experiences. Our facticity amounts to a past that in many ways we cannot change and a future that is ever-changing, as the facts of a life are continually altered over time. ‘It is part of our facticity that we are born into a certain society, with certain physical and social attributes, and that we find ourselves in situations not directly of our choosing’ [38: p. 57-58]. An individual’s life is always being projected forward in order to transcend one’s current life. Facticity, in the context of this paper, highlights that students are at dramatically different starting points when they arrive at university than in the past when students were far more homogenous. An important component of facticity is the contingent aspect of life; students will experience ever-changing facets that are out of their and universities control. An example of this is the economic circumstances of a student becoming worse which can result in her having to withdraw from university.

Secondly, existentialism emphasizes that we are all thrown into an unknown world and yet
immediately embedded in it, i.e., the “situatedness” of human existence. ‘Our being is immediately ‘in situation:’ that is, it arises in enterprises and knows itself first in so far as it is reflected in those enterprises. We discover ourselves then in a world peopled with demands, in the heart of projects ‘in the course of realization” [39: p. 39]. Moreover, although the world is initially a great mystery to us, it is of course one that we must nevertheless navigate throughout our lives. Today’s world is full of pressures on young people as work is being highly privileged, resulting in the need to be successful in higher education, and to find meaning through one’s work. We also live in a time where we have made great technological progress but have increased anxiety and stress, and what could be called a “meaning deficit” [40, 41]. ‘However advanced technology becomes, however many useful little apps we have on our idiotic i-phones, -pads and -pods, it will never enable us to overcome our vulnerability, anxiety or mortality; our confusion about who we are and what we want’ [42: p. 12]. Therefore, students are in a pressure-filled state of existence and struggling to make sense of their lives in a confusing world.

Thirdly, existentialism emphasizes that we are free to choose. Choice is of course limited by one’s facticity, but generally today’s students have more options than ever for education and careers. However, freedom and choice are accompanied by anxiety and in many cases, existential confusion. We make choices and seek to find meaning in a world in which there is arguably no objective meaning to human life. ‘Human consciousness is capable of a sickening and terrifying awareness of being submerged in an existence that is absurd, pointless, superfluous and contingent’ [42: p. 147]. Albert Camus famously articulated the absurdity of human existence with “The Myth of Sisyphus,” rolling the stone up the hill, only to have it fall back over and over again. Students are looking to avoid Sisyphus’ s fate and choose a path that makes sense to them but meaning in life is subjective and based on many factors. Cox [42: p. 27] notes, ‘that a person interprets every situation according to her desires, hopes, expectations and intentions.’ Choices are also heavily influenced by the world around us and especially by other people. ‘Rather than submit to the norms of what has been called ‘the mass,’ ‘the herd,’ and ‘the crowd,’ the Existentialists encourage people to develop their uniqueness, their own special qualities’ [43: Introduction, para 9]. Students are influenced by parents, friends, teachers and others while at the same time struggling with major and possibly lifelong decisions. Viktor Frankl noted the problem of meaning almost forty years ago – ‘For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy…the truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what…ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for’ [44: p. 21]. Many students are undoubtedly not only struggling with educational and career choices, but also choices regarding beliefs, values, and ultimately, how to live a meaningful life.

Lastly, existentialism emphasizes the problem of alienation, from oneself and from others. We exist in a world of other people with whom we are constantly in relation and conflict with. Hood [45: Prologue, para 22] notes, ‘Whether we are distancing our self from the herd, or ingratiating our self as part of the herd, it is the existence of others that defines who we are.’ Sartre noted the problem of “being-with-others” as he emphasized that we see ourselves in the eyes of other people. ‘By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the possibility of passing judgement on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other’ [39: p. 302]. The problem of alienation highlights the challenge for universities to create an environment that fosters positive relationships and engages students with others.

4 RESULTS

The existential concepts of facticity, situatedness, choice, and alienation emphasize that students are at different starting points, under great pressure to fit in to society, worried about making the wrong education and career choices, and struggling with feelings of alienation. These challenges can be substantially addressed through various targeted strategies by university faculty and administration.

Firstly, it is clear that a “one size fits all” approach to student learning in higher education is no longer viable as backgrounds, abilities, and situation of life are too diverse. Students in the same classes may have very different knowledge, skills and abilities in the topic of study. Many will lack the discipline, study skills, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills needed to be successful in university-level courses. One way to address this problem is by integrating the development of foundation or core competencies into the curriculum, especially in the first year of study. University is a multiyear project and in order to be successful students need strong self-management skills. Self-management can be regarded as a combination of both self-awareness and self-regulation.
Secondly, I suggest that universities foster “Existential skill” development. Some people seem to naturally ponder the existential questions of life but others tend to ignore them until later in life. It is never too late for people to consider these questions but young people may need to be encouraged to think deeply about them. One model which has become popular in recent years is the “School of Life” which originated in the UK and which offers a variety of programs on life.

Thirdly, since students are struggling with a myriad of choices, universities need to provide various support services. These services, however, need to be broadly focused and go beyond basic education and career counselling. Whereas some students may have a clear education and career plan, others will have tentative or nonexistent plans. A comprehensive holistic approach is required, i.e., life counselling. Students need to know that there are many options for them to choose from and that there are a lot of different ways to live their lives.

Lastly, universities can address the ongoing problem of alienation by ensuring an inclusive campus culture. A general assumption may be that students naturally make friends and integrate easily into campus life but there are undoubtedly many students that don’t integrate easily and are alienated on campus. As existentialism notes, all people experience alienation, a feeling of separation from others and the world itself. First year and international students will especially be prone to feeling alienated from classmates and the new cultural environment. The undergraduate experience is dependent on a variety of factors but probably one of the most significant is the relationships that are formed on campus. ‘Some 56 per cent of international students in Canada report having very few or no Canadian friends, according to a survey of 1,509 such students in Canada, to be published this fall by the Canadian Bureau for International Education’ [46]. Universities can foster friendships by creating an environment which encourages involvement so that students get to meet and know their classmates.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper I have applied four key themes from existential philosophy to today’s higher education students – facticity, situatedness, choice, and alienation. These themes provide a philosophical lens highlighting that students are at dramatically different starting points, under great pressure to fit into society, worried about making the wrong education and career choices, and struggling with alienation. Therefore, students are trying to make sense of their lives in an age of uncertainty and confusion, and in an ever-increasingly complex world. These are major challenges for universities but they can be addressed through various targeted strategies to improve the individual experience and increase the likelihood of student success. Ultimately, higher education should be a time and place for young people to mature and consider the major questions of life - Who am I? What do I want? How should I live? What impact will I have on the world? Universities need to encourage these questions and ensure that students can explore their answers in a stimulating and supportive environment.

REFERENCES


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