The sophomore slump: Is there something colleges can do for second-year students?

By Sheba Wheeler
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Many second-year college students, like Josh Dosumu, experience a slump after all the guidance and assistance for freshmen fades away. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post)

The novelty and excitement of freshman year is a whirlwind time for college students.

Orientation events, new friends and dedicated academic advisers create an environment for a successful first year. But educators say the second year can be the toughest one for keeping students engaged and on the road to graduation.

The reality of college hits sophomore year when students face the academic pressure demanding schedules and upper-level classes such as organic chemistry, statistics or calculus that make or break their college success.

Sophomores feel anxiety about choosing a life direction, deciding on a career path and picking a major. Social pressure to find their place on campus, losing high-school friendship ties, questioning their identity and developing autonomy from parents can cause anxiety and depression. Even parents begin to feel the pinch of a significant financial investment when loan bills start piling up that second year.

The resulting malaise students struggle through has been termed the "sophomore slump."

"It's a limbo year for many students" said Mary Stuart Hunter, co-editor of "Helping Sophomores Succeed" (2010, Jossey-Bass Publishers).

"If you think about the first year as making the transition and learning the new collegiate culture, then sophomore year is the year of finding purpose," said Hunter, who works as executive director of the University of South Carolina's National Resource Center.

During Josh Dosumu's freshman college year, a study period helped him manage his time while an adviser hand-picked his courses. But when Dosumu transferred to Metropolitan State College of Denver this year, having to choose his own classes tripped him up. He ended up with conflicting classes and double the workload.

"Advisers make sure they are there for you during the freshman year, but they aren't as available your second year," said Dosumu, a civil and mechanical engineering
Many second-year college students experience a slump after all the guidance and assistance for freshmen fades away. College sophomore Josh Dosumu, a civil and mechanical engineering student at Metropolitan State College of Denver, has experienced second-year difficulties. (Cyrus McCrimmon, The Denver Post) major.

Dosumu's problems were not a function of him being a transfer student. Even students who started out as freshmen at the same university have problems adjusting. Amanda Wasil, a 19-year-old University of Denver sophomore who is leaning toward a major in international studies met with her adviser regularly her first year as part of a freshman seminar.

But Wasil hasn't seen her adviser as she comes to the close of her sophomore year.

"Declaring a major is deciding what you are going to be doing for the rest of your life," she said. "That pressure and the job career implications huge. You have to be more serious and adult."

Structured academic advising for second-year students is lacking at the very time they need help declaring a major, said Julie Tetley, chief of academic advising and the first-year-experience division at the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Tetley said that adding an extra layer of academic advising on top of access to a faculty adviser for any first- or second-year student can help head off the sophomore slump.

Sometimes its ongoing conversations with an academic adviser or written reflections an adviser might require. For example, at the Air Force Academy, students must maintain a syllabus for academic advising much like they would in a classroom setting.

"We set up student learning outcomes, things we expect them to do and know and the ways in which they should behave as a result of academic advising," Tetley said.

Tetley suggests that common first-year programs dealing with student personality and career assessment should be moved to the second year.

"It's their sophomore year when they will be most ready to learn those things, when they are struggling to figure out a major," Tetley said. "And if only seniors are trying to find jobs, maybe that's a little too late."

Experts say increasing a student's level of engagement is what brings about true retention and staves off the slump.

Metro senior Kristen Evans, 21, practiced meditation to stay focused during her second year. But the psychology major credits her extracurricular activities for keeping her motivated and engaged. She interned at the Phoenix Center at Auraria, assisting victims of domestic violence.
"That job gradually connected me to people and organizations all over campus," Evans said. "Giving presentations and working together make you feel more invested in college."

On top of increased academic workload, sophomore students describe a year filled with anxiety about changing relationships that wreak emotional and sometimes physical havoc, said Erin Fleischer, a Denver psychotherapist and licensed clinical social worker.

Common problems include lost friendships with high-school buddies and the end of long-distance relationships. Many have heard about the infamous "freshman 15." But the body-image issues that result from that weight gain can turn into full-blown eating disorders by sophomore year, said Fleischer, who specializes in anxiety, trauma and eating disorders at Thrive Counseling. Other crises that tend to occur during freshman year, including date rape, aren't addressed until the second year, when students lose the social support from family and hometown friends, another developmental hallmark of the second college year.

"Being away from parents, families and hometown friendships can make something that happens freshman year turn into something a student might seek counseling for their sophomore year," Fleischer said.