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ABSTRACT

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**Initiations Rituals: Sanctioning Rites of Passage Rituals  
to Increase Involvement**

**American Association for Counseling and Development  
1991 Annual Conference  
Reno-Sparks Convention Center  
Reno, Nevada 89504  
April 21-24, 1991**

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Anthropologists have documented the importance of rites of passage rituals for marking the successful passage from one position in the social structure to another. The characteristics and importance of rituals and rites of passage to mark the transition high school to college will be presented. It is proposed that colleges and universities utilize this knowledge and establish sanctioned, rigorous, initiation rituals for new students (and some clubs) as rites of passage to increase the students' involvement and sense of belonging and responsibility in their new collegiate community, factors known to affect satisfaction, retention and graduation rates.

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**Introduction**

Often it is claimed that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is ill-defined. Hollingshead (1949), in reference to the young people of Elmstown just prior to World War II, noted that "there are no rites or ceremonies, such as are found among many pre-literate people, to signify the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood". Arnold van Gennep (1909), a Dutch anthropologist, studied the rites of membership in tribal society and indicated that life was comprised of a series of passages leading individuals from birth to death and from membership in one group or status level to another.

Tinto (1975; 1987) indicated that college students also go through a longitudinal process of passing through various transitions. Like other persons in society, they must separate themselves from past associations and make a transition into college life. The three major stages of passages listed by van Gennep (1960) are separation, transition, and reincorporation. College students likewise have to pass through various stages of separation and transition as they are moving into life on the campus. Their first stage is separation where they leave home and disassociate themselves from their high school friends and their place of residence. This is, of course, if a person goes away to college. If they stay at home, they also expose themselves to a number of potential risks such as over-exposure to their college friends or peer groups, or family members, or change in values as they begin to become more oriented to college life.

The transition stage is a passage from the old to the new, between associations of the past and the plan for new association of the present and the future. College students must be able to cope with the problems of adjusting to this new social and intellectual environment.

The final stage--incorporation--requires the college student to become incorporated into the community life of the university. They should move away from the norms and behavior patterns of the past, but often find it difficult adapting to norms that are appropriate to their new college setting and subsequent membership in the social and intellectual communities of the college campus. But unlike incorporation in traditional societies, individuals in college often are not provided with formal rituals and ceremonies where their contacts are insured. In those cases where they are, it may be through an orientation program or activities sponsored by a fraternity, sorority, residence hall or residence hall association, student union, extracurricular, varsity or intramural athletics or some other campus activity. Many students are not able to make these integrative contacts on their own but need the aforementioned activities in order to integrate into college life.

Universities and colleges must take specific action concentrated on very early stages of a college student's career to help them make the transition into college life. Institutional policies must be particularly sensitive to the separation and transitional difficulties new students face. One way of doing this is through the college orientation program while another is fraternity/sorority involvement.

A very successful process has been intrusive advising (Glennen, 1975, 1991; Glennen & Baxley, 1985)) whereby faculty take the initiative and call students in for advising. This is particularly helpful during the first year of the student's transition to college. The more an individual is supported and involved in the social and intellectual life of the institution, the more the student is apt to persist through to graduation.

As mentioned previously, anthropologists have documented the importance of rites of passage rituals for marking the successful passage from one position in the social structure to another (van Gennep, 1909, 1960). This presentation will propose that colleges and universities utilize this knowledge and establish **sanctioned, rigorous, initiation rituals for new students** (and some clubs) as rites of passage to increase the students' involvement and sense of belonging and responsibility in their new collegiate community, factors known to affect satisfaction, retention and graduation rates (Astin, 1977; Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990; Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Boyer (1987) observed that "a community of scholars is too important to relinquish. At a time when the social bonds are tenuous, students, during their collegiate years, should discover

the reality of their dependency on each other. They must understand what it means to share and sustain traditions. Community must be built" (p. 195).

#### Purpose of this presentation

1. Recurrent and escalating student problems, such as alcohol abuse, unsanctioned hazing, date rape or other sexual exploits are being used currently by students as rites of passage rituals to prove their "readiness" and "worthiness" for recognition as a member of the college or university community and as an adult (Collison, 1990; Nuwer, 1990; Sherry & Stolberg, 1987; Twale, 1989).
2. The characteristics and importance of rituals and rites of passage to mark the transition from one position in the social structure to another will be presented.
3. It will be recommended that we should be capitalizing on these important and powerful forces, which appear to operate naturally in many cultures, including our own culture, by designing and using constructive rituals for rites of passage purposes in our colleges and universities, rather than trying to abolish them (Brown, 1980; Butler, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1990d, 1990e, 1991a, 1991b; Turner, 1969).
4. A rationale for colleges and universities to establish sanctioned, rigorous initiation rituals as rites of passage to college for new students will be proposed.
5. Participants will have an opportunity to discuss the proposal and generate ideas for implementing the concepts at their institutions.

#### Importance or relevance of the topic

Moving from high school to college represents a significant passage from one position in our social structure to another. Anthropologists (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909, 1960) have documented the importance of **rites of passage**, special rituals that mark the passage from one position in the social structure to another, in making persons feel they belong and in helping them to become involved and contributing members of the community, factors that have been identified as being critical to students' successful achievement and persistence in completing a college degree (Astin, 1977; Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

When the responsible adults of the culture do not design and

implement appropriately rigorous, challenging, and meaningful rites of passage rituals to mark this transition phase, the way is left open for upper-class students to design their own rituals for new students, without the benefit of responsible adult input and sanction, and to require the new students, through peer pressure and threat of intimidation and ostracism, to perform or engage in the unsanctioned ritual(s) in order to be accepted into the university community and adulthood. Requiring new students to abuse alcohol has become, perhaps, the most common, but certainly not the only, very harmful, unsanctioned rites of passage ritual used (Leemon, 1972; Newman, 1984; Nuwer, 1990; Richmond, 1987).

The most common of our culture's responses to rites of passage rituals has been, generally, to prohibit them because of their potential danger and to pass rules or legislation that make them illegal, rather than to replace or redesign the rituals to make them safer. We seem not to have understood the critical importance that these rites of passage rituals play in marking the movement between positions in the culture, especially between high school and college. Thus, in the absence of sanctioned rituals, unsanctioned ones, more dangerous than those prohibited, such as alcohol abuse, are devised and implemented. Since they are not sanctioned, colleges and universities attempt to assume no responsibility for injuries from the unsanctioned rituals when they occur. The responsible perpetrators, if they can be identified, are chastised and prosecuted for attempting to implement, on the basis of the students' intuition, what has been a well-documented, but little-known or ignored, cultural need (Kett, 1977; Kottak, 1987).

We will propose that rigorous initiation rituals should be included and required, rather than prohibited, as a part of new students' orientation and initial collegiate experiences. This represents a different direction than has more recently been proposed. However, the anthropological literature clearly supports the importance of societies requiring their members to participate in rites of passage, something that preliterate and tribal societies apparently understood intuitively.

This clear evidence strongly suggests the importance that sanctioned initiation rituals could play in helping our students to make more successful transitions in our colleges and universities, an important factor in developing strong bonds with the other students in the collegiate community and with the institution. Students' lives will be enhanced while they are students, and they will establish stronger allegiance to the institution which will continue as alumni, a factor that has important implications for continued support, both emotionally

and financially, to the institution.

To set the stage and provide a backdrop for this proposal, I will present an overview of the characteristics of rituals and rites of passage. A description of how these characteristics might apply to help students in their transition to becoming successful students and contributing members of their college or university community and of society will also be given.

At the end of our presentation, we will invite your comments, reactions and questions. As I review the characteristics of rituals and rites of passage, I encourage you to reflect on how you might have dealt or are dealing with rites of passage in your own lives, both personally and with those around you. Finally, if there is time, we might try to generate ideas that could be used as sanctioned initiation rituals, taking into account the characteristics of rites of passage rituals presented in this paper.

#### Rites of Passage

1. Rites of passage rituals have been identified by anthropologists as important events in marking the successful transition of persons from one position in a social structure to another (Turner, 1969; van Gennep, 1909, 1960).
2. Many rites of passage rituals exist in our organizations and society, including our colleges and universities, but frequently, they are unrecognized as such and are not utilized as effectively as they could be.
3. The critical importance that rites of passage rituals play in helping students understand themselves and their relationships to their peers appears not to be understood well by administrators and professors, and therefore appropriate passage rituals frequently are ignored, or perhaps worse, prohibited (Butler, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1990d, 1990e, 1991a, 1991b).
4. Rites of passage were first identified by a Belgium anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep (1909, 1960) at the beginning of the 20th Century.
5. van Gennep noted that certain kinds of rituals around the world had similar structures and that they were associated with the movement or passage of persons from one position in the social structure to another. Examples include births, weddings and funerals.

6. Rituals are stylized formal behaviors that are performed seriously as a social act. They are symbolic and have a pre-determined sequential nature that is generated by specific reasons (Schultz and Lavenda, 1987, pp. 140-141).
7. The way in which rituals are performed is as important as are the specific parts of the rituals (Schultz and Lavenda, 1987, p. 141).
8. The purpose of rituals is to give direction to the group performing the ritual. Examples of rituals are birthday parties, weddings, bridal showers, baseball batter's routine, science experiments, examinations, master's theses and comprehensive examinations and graduation ceremonies (Schultz and Lavenda, 1987, p. 144).
9. Rites of passage are "...rituals associated with the movement, or passage, of people from one position in the social structure to another..." (Schultz & Lavenda, 1987, p. 141) such as from childhood to adulthood, high school to college, civilian to military, or a group nonmember to a group member.
10. Rites of passage are characterized by three phases:
  - a. Separation phase--This represents symbolic behavior that indicates the separation of persons from an earlier position in the social structure. A person leaves behind the symbols and practices of his or her previous position. Examples include leaving home or a community, completing a course of study; moving on from a grade level, a school, a school district, or a club; and leaving a job (Schultz and Lavenda, 1987, p. 141).
  - b. Transition or liminal phase--This represents the in-between period when the person or "passenger" is neither a part of the previous position nor is part of the new position. The period is marked by rolelessness, ambiguity, anxiety and some perceived threat or danger and a perceived potential for failure. It is often a time when the persons (or passengers) involved are subjected to ordeal or "peer pressure" by those who have already passed through and are currently members of the new group (Newman, 1984; Schultz and Lavenda, 1987).
    - Effective transition or liminal rituals include, in addition to the rolelessness, ambiguity, humbling, "grinding down" and peer pressure, **reconstruction** components that are designed to instruct the passenger about what needs to be



learned or accomplished to be an effective member of the new order. This occurs when the "tribal esoterics", the values, history, ethics, goals, image and culture of the new order or group are taught and tested to insure that the passenger has learned the important characteristics and values of the new group and is worthy to become a member.

- Submission to ordeal by prospective members or passengers provides current members of the group a means to assess the worthiness of the prospective member to join the group.
- Submission to ordeal by prospective members or passengers provides the passengers a means of demonstrating their worthiness to become a member of the new group.

#### Comparison of liminality and normal social structure

##### Liminality

transition  
homogeneity  
communitas  
equality  
anonymity  
absence of property  
absence of status  
nakedness or uniform dress  
sexual continence or excess  
minimization of sex  
distinctions  
absence of rank  
humility  
disregard of personal  
appearance  
unselfishness  
total obedience  
  
sacredness  
sacred instruction  
silence  
simplicity  
acceptance of pain and  
suffering

##### Normal Social Structure

state  
heterogeneity  
structure  
inequality  
names  
property  
status  
dress distinctions  
sexuality  
maximization of sex  
distinctions  
rank  
pride  
care for personal  
appearance  
selfishness  
obedience only to  
superior rank  
secularity  
technical knowledge  
speech  
complexity  
avoidance of pain and  
suffering

(Turner, 1969)

- c. Reaggregation or reincorporation phase--This involves the passenger being reintroduced to society (or the new group) but in a new position. It represents a

relatively stable state and extends to the passenger the rights, privileges and responsibilities accorded to others in this group (Turner, 1965, p. 95).

- Acceptance of the passenger into the group by the current group members indicates the passage to the new position in the group is complete for the passenger.
- The whole process will begin again when the person desires to move to another position within the group or to another social group. For example, new members will have to demonstrate "worthiness" to be elected or appointed to roles of leadership or responsibility, even for positions that are normally reserved for new members of the group. Based on their performance in these roles, over time, other roles or responsibilities may be accorded to the new members.

Based on the previous information, the following summary observations seem warranted.

1. Our culture and the thousands of groups within it have many rites of passage rituals for marking the passage of its members from one position to another (Deal, 1982; Nuwer, 1990; Sanday, 1990).
2. The evidence regarding the role of rites of passage rituals is compelling and suggests the critical importance in having formal structured rituals to help students define their relationships with each other and with the institution.
3. When the culture or group does not provide for such rituals to be a part of the approved rituals of the culture (class setting), or perhaps even worse, tries to restrict or prohibit them, there still will be attempts by some persons, usually the dominant students, to pressure (i.e., peer pressure) or require students to submit to their private ordeals and unsanctioned rituals in order to measure the worthiness of the new students for becoming one of them (an Idyllic University student).
4. Current members of groups (classes, colleges, or universities) have an innate cultural or social need for prospective members to demonstrate their worthiness to become a member of the current member's group, class or institution. As an example, the sometimes not so subtle pressure reported by some students to purchase shirts with the name and/or logo of the new institution represents a common, but unrecognized type of liminal ritual.

5. Persons (students) seeking to move to, gain membership in or acceptance by a new group (or even another person) have an innate cultural or social need to have some means to demonstrate their worthiness to be a member or part of that new group. New students frequently go shopping prior to matriculation at a college or university for the express purpose of buying new clothing and other items that will help them to identify with (or become one of) the students at the new institution. These acts may be important, but are seldom of sufficient rigor for the receiving group. Thus, the new students frequently are more than willing to perform other rituals to help them gain the acceptance of and full membership in the new group.
6. Involving new students in sanctioned rites of passage rituals (initiations) will provide safe ways for colleges and universities to assist the new students (passengers) to demonstrate their worthiness to join their new institution and provide a means for the current institutional members to assess the worthiness of the new students to become one of them.
7. Initiation rituals provide a vehicle for the institution to teach their new students about the heritage, history and other cultural values and aspects of their institution and to involve the new students in challenging but constructive activities for the good of the students and the institution.
8. Providing new students with challenging sanctioned rites of passage (initiation) rituals to perform sets the stage for strong bonding to occur with the current upper-class students and the institution. This bonding will result in mutual feelings of belongingness between the new students and the upper-class students; will contribute to increased levels of persistence by all students to complete a degree and will develop stronger feelings of loyalty to and support of the institution by all students, both while they are enrolled and as alumni after they leave the institution.
9. If the institution does not provide for sanctioned rites of passage rituals to be required within the approved rituals of the institution, or even worse, tries to restrict or prohibit them, there still will be attempts by some persons to pressure and/or require those who are seeking passage to the new position to submit to ordeal anyway. It is these rituals that are required outside the bounds and jurisdiction of responsible persons within the institution that end up being very injurious and damaging. Examples include the requirement that individuals drink inordinate amounts of alcoholic beverages, engage in sexual exploits, and/or commit some other illegal activity, all of which

potentially have very negative long term effects.

10. Teaching students about the characteristics of and needs for rites of passage rituals can assist them to understand their own needs to belong to something outside of themselves and to value the rituals associated with the rites of passage process that is required to accomplish a sense of belonging in any new group.
11. Officials in colleges and universities need to recognize this cultural and social phenomena and devise ways to manage these forces constructively, by teaching, assisting and encouraging responsible students to design and implement appropriately rigorous rites of passage rituals which can be sanctioned by their institution rather than try to prevent and abolish unsanctioned rituals. As in other aspects of our society, violations of the rites of passage rules by some students may occur from time to time. Provisions and procedures for dealing with and holding these violators accountable by their peers and by the institution will be important, just as it is in other aspects of our society.

#### A Proposal for Increasing Involvement and Belonging

1. The use of rigorous sanctioned initiation rituals as a part of new student orientation activities will reduce the need for upper class students to compel new students to comply with performing unreasonable and dangerous rituals, the kind that are frequently and currently being required for new students to be accepted at institutions and in organizations.
2. It is the unsanctioned rites of passage rituals, such as alcohol abuse, date rape, sexual exploitation and other illegal or precarious rituals, that end up being injurious, dangerous and damaging.
3. Rigorous university sanctioned initiation rituals conducted as a part of new student orientation offer opportunities to design and require challenging but safer creative alternatives to meet the rites of passage needs of both the passenger student and the receiving group than currently exist on most campuses.
4. As many students as possible under the direction of the student leadership must be involved in the design, implementation and administration of the rites of passage rituals, since it is the student body or student groups to which the new students (or passengers) are seeking membership and recognition.

5. College and university administrators and faculty must be involved in the design, approval and management of the rites of passage rituals to ensure that sanctioned and safe, but appropriately rigorous and challenging, rituals are instituted and administered by the receiving student group.
6. Students, along with faculty and administrators, must be involved in enforcing compliance with the sanctioned rites of passage rituals.
7. Students, along with faculty and administrators, must be involved in invoking consequences for students who carry out unsanctioned rites of passage rituals.

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### Group Discussion Activities

Identify situations where rites of passage rituals are practiced.

Examples:

probationary employment periods  
conditional admissions  
"Rookie" of the year in athletics  
seniority in employment and/or government  
"serving time in the trenches"  
learning and reciting mottos or pledges prior to  
joining churches, clubs or organizations

A. Discuss the advantages/benefits and disadvantages/negatives of rites of passage rituals.

B. Relate to the group your personal positive and negative experiences with accomplishing a ritual.

C. Relate to the group your personal positive and negative experiences in requiring someone else to accomplish a ritual.

D. Compare how these were different and what contributed to their differences.

E. What could have made negative experiences more positive?

F. What benefits might accrue by developing and instituting sanctioned, formal, rigorous orientation/initiation rituals?

G. What objections might be raised to discourage developing and instituting formal, rigorous orientation/initiation rituals?

H. How might the objections be resolved and turned to a benefit?

I. What ideas do you have for instituting rigorous, formal rites of passage rituals that could substitute for current dangerous rituals, e.g. alcohol abuse, sexual exploitation or other harmful activities?

J. What persons or groups would need to be included in the development and administration of rites of passage rituals?

K. How could the rites of passage rituals be monitored so excesses, substitutions and additions were avoided?

L. Suggest consequences for persons or groups who violate the sanctioned rites of passage rituals by imposing their own.

M. Suggest consequences for new students who fail to participate in the rites of passage rituals.'