

Rites of Passage, Rites of Academia: Facilitating the High School to College Transition through the Matriculation Process

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Abstract

The transition from high school to college can be challenging for many college bound students. In many colleges, polytechnics and universities today, administrators have put in place various strategies to facilitate a smooth high school-to-college transition for freshmen. In particular, Freshmen Orientation Programs (FOP) have been strategically used as a process towards the successful matriculation of students. This study is aimed to examine the Matriculation Process of freshmen through the theoretical lens of rites of passage. It employed participant observation and interviews, to examine pertinent issues of transition and adaptation of freshmen during the Matriculation Process at Ho Polytechnic. The findings revealed that FOPs which constituted the rites in the passage of transition from high school to the Polytechnic followed a process of ritualized phases akin to traditional rites of passage with the Ceremony of Matriculation as the crowning rite of incorporation. Post-matriculation evaluation interviews with participants showed that the Matriculation Process as an academic rite of passage was to a large extent effective in facilitating a smooth transition to life in the Polytechnic.

Key words: Rites of Passage, Rites of Academia, Transition, Freshmen Orientation, Matriculation Process

1. Introduction

The transition from high school to college can be very difficult in many respects for freshmen (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). According to Giddan (1988), the first year of college is the most critical period of adjustment a student may encounter. Unfortunately, this fact has often been overlooked. College bound high school graduates are often reassured that their time in college is going to be the “best four years of their lives,” however, the reality can be quite different (Melleby, 2005). According to Brian Harke (2010, p.1) as high school students graduate, “feelings of satisfaction, excitement and nostalgia are supplemented with the titillation of moving on to college life.” However, Harke argues, there is besides the excitement about graduation “a very important commonality between many of these graduating high school seniors that affects their college future: they are overly optimistic and confident in their ability to manage the challenges they will encounter at college.” Harke called this phenomenon the *freshman myth*. The freshman myth, he explains, results in disenchantment due to the fact that the academic, social, and personal expectations of new college students are not always met after arriving at college.

Low (2013), observes that the transition from high school to college can be so challenging that it feels like “stepping into a strange country and learning a new language, culture, customs and currency.” This phenomenon which many freshmen experience upon arrival in college has also been referred to as “college culture shock.” Oberg (1960) describe the phenomenon as an “occupational disease” suffered by those who are introduced to a foreign culture. According to him, “culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p.177). Oberg (1960) identified four stages of culture shock: (a) *the honeymoon stage*, characterized by excitement about being in a new place; (b) *the stage of crisis*, characterized by feelings of frustration, anger and depression that lead to culture shock; (c) *the stage of recovery*, where the individual has learnt how to function normally in the new culture; (d) *the stage of adjustment*, where the person has fully acclimated and is able to function optimally. For some new college students, college may seem like a foreign country since they are away from home, some for the first time, separated from friends, and surrounded by strangers. Beginning college with “the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety an individual experiences when placed in a strange cultural setting” (People and Bailey, 2009, p.431) can be overwhelming. College bound students need help to transition smoothly.

Patricia McDonough (2004), argues that many students have difficulty negotiating the school-to-college transition due to the high school system’s limited capacity for college preparation. According to her, one essential element to preparation for college is adequate information. High-quality information, combined with timely advisement about college, can make a difference to ease students’ transitional challenges, helping them become more smoothly acclimated to college lifestyle. Thus Boyer (1987) recommends that “the first important step in improving the undergraduate college is to help students move from school to higher education. The goal must be to provide more helpful information and make it possible for students to begin with confidence an educational journey that will lead them to the right college and extend far beyond the college years” (p.8).

Freshman seminars and orientation programs have been organized by colleges, polytechnics and universities to counteract this dynamic of problematic school-to-college transition by taking proactive steps to socialize

students early in the first year toward a more accurate understanding of the kind of academic and social climate they can reasonably expect to find at the college. While it is admittedly impossible to prepare students completely for the high school-to-college transition, Such interventions, have been found very handy in guiding students to identify various resources and how to evaluate their college viability within the parameters of realistic expectations.

The purpose of this study is to examine the high school-to-college transition, focusing on the actions college, polytechnic and university leaders have taken to facilitate transitional processes students encounter, in order to enable the new student feel at home in the new college environment. In particular, the study is aimed to discuss how the process of matriculation has been used at Ho Polytechnic as an *academic rite of passage* to prepare fresh students to become well acclimated to the social, cultural, and academic life of the institution. Using the anthropological theory of rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960) as a conceptual lens of analysis, the study examines the various stages of the college transition process focusing on the freshman seminars and orientation programs as components of an academic ritual process (Turner, 1969) in the rites of passage toward full incorporation in the Ceremony of Matriculation.

2. The Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1 The Theory of Rites of Passage

The theory of rites of passage was first developed by a French anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep. According to him:

The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another. Wherever there are fine distinctions among age or occupational groups, progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts... For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally defined. (Van Gennep, 1909/1960, pp.2-3).

Rites of passage, accordingly, are ceremonies and rituals practiced by traditional cultures to mark and to celebrate key moments of transition such as from youth to adulthood. From a general point of view, rites of passage are a “series of ceremonies, rituals, and/or events which are organized around the life cycle of an individual and provide a passage, essentially a transition from one status to another...” (Freed and Freed, 1980, p.333). As markers of maturation, rites of passage incorporate ritualized activities that prepare pubescent girls and boys for transition to mature adulthood. The rituals in the rites of passage encompass three stages in a cycle of transformation and maturation, namely, *the stage of separation, the transition (liminal) stage, and the stage of incorporation*:

- 1) Traditionally, *the Phase of Separation* was enacted by camping the neophytes in a place of seclusion from their regular life positions “either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both” (Turner, 1969, p.94) leading to a ritualized, symbolic and social death that ushers the neophytes through a rhythm of growth across the *limen or threshold*: “The essential feature of these symbolizations is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect and both living and dead from another” (Turner, 1967, p.97).
- 2) *Transition or Liminal Phase*: Having crossed the *limen or threshold*, the neophytes are released into the transition or middle stage as *liminars* who are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, and ceremonial”(Turner, 1969, p.95) where the break from the former social position has not yet translated into the anticipated new social role. It is essentially the life-phase of those who are no longer, but not yet; who live as it were a “moment in and out of time” (Turner, 1969, p.96); who are in “the state and process of mid-transition in a rite of passage” (Turner and Turner, 1978, p.249). In this phase of transition, the neophytes experience a crisis of identity as they “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner, 1969, p.95). The liminal stage is therefore a time of experimentation and discovery of what is needed to take on the new social position.
- 3) *The Phase of Incorporation*: The ultimate goal of rites of passage is to prepare the neophytes for mature adult roles by imparting to them the collective wisdom of the society. For this reason, the neophytes are secluded, that is, “released from structure into communitas only to return to structure revitalized by their experience of communitas” (Turner, 1969, p.129). In this way, the ritual cycle of the rites of passage completes itself as the process of discovery and experimentation during the liminal period ends naturally in a ritualized, symbolic, social rebirth by which learning experiences acquired are concretized, accommodated and performed in the new social position.

2.2 Matriculation: Concept, Origin and Practice in Academia

Matriculation is an old tradition, originating at Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a medieval requirement for every Regent Master to keep a Register (*matricula*). The Regent Masters were the Masters of Arts, who formed the ruling body of the University, and who taught undergraduate students.

The Register established who were the ‘real’ students deserving of the University’s protection, and also served as a record of students’ progress through their courses (The Harrells, 2010). This fact is corroborated by a ‘Biographical Register’ edited by Andrew Hegarty. Volume 43 of this register is comprised of a comprehensive record of all those who were matriculated at St. John’s College, Oxford from its foundation in 1555 until 1660 (Hegarty, 2011).

Rainer Schwinges (2003), in *A History of the University in Europe*, noted that matriculation was one of the highest functions of University authorities, and signified the formal act which conferred a legally recognized status. This involved the student taking an oath of matriculation, paying a statutorily determined matriculation fee, and finally, having his/her name registered in a special register, the (*matricula album registrum*) which recorded both the oath and the fees paid by each person matriculated (pp.177-8). This, according to Schwinges (2003), was the situation at the end of the fourteenth century and throughout the fifteenth century, during which period matriculation in special documentary registers represented a relatively well-established procedure. However, unknown students intruded the system to the extent that “a ‘master’s registration book’ (*rotulus, cedula, matricula magistri*)” was introduced to “set out information enabling the master to survey and record the performance of participants at particular exercises and readings and to distinguish genuine students from those spurious students who merely wished to enjoy the privileges of the university” (p.178). The register, therefore, established who were the “real” students and deserving of the University’s protection, rights and privileges; and at the same time, it served as a cumulative record book with which the performance of students were monitored.

In the course of the sixteenth century, the register, properly known as the ‘Rector’s Register’, spread throughout the whole of Europe as the central record of new arrivals. New students entering universities were obliged to be matriculated within a specific period, normally, a month. The general university statutes constantly stressed this obligation, especially in passages read out regularly to the university public. Heads of colleges and halls were obligated to accept only matriculated students into their houses and teaching arrangements. The ideal was set out in the ‘information booklets’ for new students, and was intended to provide introduction orientation to those entering university (Schwinges, 2003, p.180). The pecuniary interest in the matriculation of students was as important as the legal consideration; proceeds from matriculation fees were the most important sources of revenue for medieval universities (Ibid, p.185).

Matriculation was, therefore, a traditional higher education ritual, and although the term has today become synonymous with college entrance exam or convocation, historically, it was an induction ceremony that signified the incorporation of freshmen into a college or university community. Thus, Boyer (1987), noted, “The term ‘matriculation’ has largely disappeared from the vocabulary of the modern American college, and with it the sense of a student’s formal installation into a learning community” (p.43). The Matriculation ceremony signaled the joint and reciprocal commitment of the institution to the enrolling student and of the student to the mission and culture of the College: “An Involving College makes a concerted effort to help newcomers feel welcome while at the same time articulating what the institution stands for” (Kuh, et al., 1991, p.258).

3. Methodology and Research Design

The methodology was informed by the purpose of the study, namely, to examine how an organized program of matriculation was used at Ho Polytechnic as an academic rite of passage for the smooth transition of freshmen into the academic and social life of the institution. The study is based mainly on the 2013-2014 matriculation process which began on September 20, 2013 with a program of activities marking the arrival of freshmen, freshman orientations and seminars, culminating in the ceremony of matriculation held on November 29, 2013.

The method used for data collection was primarily qualitative, specifically ethnography that incorporated predominantly participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973). In particular, ethnography has been recognized as constituting an approach that focuses on people in the natural context of “what they actually do” (Gelder, 1997, p.145). This is so because ethnography “involves the ethnographer participating in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p.1). Thus, Herbert (2000) argues that ethnography “explores the tissue of everyday life to reveal the processes and meanings which undergird social action” (p.551).

Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, generated narratives that “describe an individual’s actions, experiences and beliefs” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 132); and provided an invaluable access to thick “descriptive data in the subjects own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world” (Ibid, p.96). The combination of these methods, namely, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, made it possible to gather rich information and develop thick descriptions of what transpired at the various stages of the matriculation process; how the freshmen involved see their own actions and those of others, and place this in the context in which the actions take place.

Basically, this involved interacting with, observing, and dialoging with freshmen and facilitators of the

matriculation program at various occasions and places throughout the whole matriculation process. A field diary was kept to collect data and to keep track of participant observations in the various situations and places. Specifically, observations were done on the day of arrival in the main halls of residence, during the program of orientation in the auditorium, during the fresher's week celebration at the students' JCR, and at various departmental seminars and orientation programs. These and other sites provided key zones and occasions and afforded conditions that were favourable and accessible for observation and interviewing during the matriculation process. Field notes were revised and regularly stored in the computer.

Two sets of interviews were conducted: the first, on various occasions during the matriculation process; the second, after the ceremony of matriculation. In both cases, participants were chosen at random from the freshmen. Interviews were focused mainly on exploring participants' perspectives on the matriculation program. Some members of the matriculation committee and facilitators of the matriculation program, leaders of the student's JCR peer mentoring team were also interviewed on issues relating to the matriculation plan and the orientation program. In all, twenty-five freshmen and five facilitators of the matriculation program were interviewed.

4. Results

The results of this study revealed that students encountered serious challenges during the first semester in college. Making transition from the secured and well-regulated educational environment of high school into the new and unfamiliar environment of college that required independence, autonomy, and personal decision-making has been a destabilizing experience for many freshmen. The administrators of the institution responded by putting in place a *Matriculation Process*, organized to counteract the dynamic of problematic high school-to-college transition by taking proactive steps to induct and socialize students early in the first semester toward a more accurate understanding of the kind of academic and social climate they can reasonably expect to find at the college. Matriculation understood in the context of this study, therefore, is a *process* designed to help freshmen to become successful in their educational endeavours through the instrumentality of the components of the *Matriculation Process*. This is to be differentiated from the *Ceremony of Matriculation*, which is the crowning event, celebrated as a climax to the *Matriculation Process*.

4.1 Components Of The Matriculation Process

The matriculation process is directed towards assisting freshmen to succeed in achieving their educational goals by providing effective core services. The program components are student support services provided by the Polytechnic to facilitate successful freshman transition and acclimatization. These include : *A Week Intensive Orientation, Assessment and Placement, Counseling, Academic Advising, Freshman Seminars, SRC JCR Fresher's Week*.

- *A Week Intensive Orientation*: provided students with information relating to various key programs and services of the Polytechnic, institutional procedures and academic expectations. Full details can be found in the Orientation Handbook 2013/2014, p.16.
- *Assessment and Placement*: Admissions are base entirely on West African Examination Council (WAEC) results. No entrance exams are required, except for matured candidates. Assessment and placement, therefore, is a process by which the various departments in the Polytechnic collect information about entering students in an effort to facilitate their success by ensuring their appropriate placement into the curriculum.
- *Counseling*: workshops are organized at regular intervals to help freshmen define an educational plan, and to successfully accomplish their academic, career, and personal goals. The Polytechnic Guidance and Counseling Team, in collaboration with the Matriculation Committee, guide both teaching and non-teaching faculty in communicating to entering students the role of the matriculation process in influencing their personal, social, and academic success.
- *Academic Advising*: Academic Heads of Department play the professional role of academic advisors in the Polytechnic and are regularly available to help students navigate the academic channels of the institution, to give first-hand academic advising, and to address all the academic needs of freshmen.
- *Freshman Seminars*: are departmental seminars designed to provide support for first year students as they matriculate and adjust to life in the Polytechnic. Freshman seminars are regularly scheduled sessions that discuss issues such as time management, academic milestones, learning skills, self-esteem, relationship concerns, and various dilemmas which students usually face during the course of their first year.
- *JCR – Fresher's Week*: is an orientation program planned by students for students. It is essentially a peer mentoring program organized annually by the Students Representative Council (SRC) Junior Common Room (JCR) to provide support and encouragement to freshmen. The peer mentors transfer the knowledge and skills they have acquired through their matriculation to help freshmen through planned activities, and campus program involvement. It is an orientation schedule which allows

freshmen to interact with continuing students, choose from a variety of different events, and take care of all their social and academic needs.

4.2 The Matriculation Committee

The Matriculation Committee oversees the matriculation process and makes recommendations regarding the Polytechnic matriculation policy, procedures, and activities. The Matriculation Committee is responsible for training faculty, administration, and staff on the delivery and outcomes of matriculation services. The Matriculation Handbook serves as a source book to guide the committee in this endeavour. A Student Handbook is given to each freshman at the beginning of the matriculation program. The Student Handbook provides freshmen with information relating to the matriculation components and thereby serves as a resource book for them as they navigate their way through the Polytechnic.

The Matriculation Committee is chaired by the Dean of Students, who is also the Dean of Matriculation. Other members are: the Polytechnic Counselor; Assistant Registrar, Student Affairs; Assistant Registrar, Admissions; Assistant Registrar, Public Relations; President, Students Representative Council (SRC); Coordinator, SRC – JCR; Coordinator, Students Loan Trust Fund (SLTF); Senior Residential Hall Warden.

5. Analytical Framework For The Matriculation Process As A Rite Of Passage

Using the theory of rites of passage as a conceptual lens of analysis of the data gathered in this study, we discuss the Matriculation Process with particular focus on the orientation programs and freshman seminars as ritualized components of an academic rite of passage.

The theory of rites of passage as developed by Arnold Van Gennep (; 1960, p.2), involves a “series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another”. This social “progression from one group to the next is accompanied by special acts”, which ritually and ceremonially mark off the “passing from one defined position to another which is equally defined”. In academia, freshmen acquire a change of status through matriculation, as they transition from high school to college. While this may seem to involve merely a change in the designation ‘high school graduate’ to that of ‘college student’, nevertheless, in terms of Van Gennep’s theory, to be matriculated indicates the ritual and ceremonial celebration of the process of passing from one socially, culturally, and academically defined position to another, and a progression from one group, the high school, to the next, the college. The progression from one group to the next involves crossing borders and is accompanied by special actions: “Crossing borders and thresholds is always accompanied by rites, just as moving from one status to another” (Leach and Greimas 1989, p.48). The structure of the rites of passage is tripartite, encompassing the phases of *Separation*, *Transition*, and *Incorporation*. Correspondingly, Victor Turner (1969) distinguished the rites as *Preliminal*, *Liminal*, and *Postliminal Rites*.

5.1 The Rite of Separation: Crossing the High School-to- College Threshold

Traditionally, *the rite of separation* involved taking the neophytes out of the community to a place of seclusion, away from the routines of daily life in order to teach them how to live as mature and respectable adults. This act of removing the neophytes from their regular social environment or life positions by camping them in a place of seclusion symbolically signified crossing the *limen or threshold* that closes the door on their former social position and opens the pathway towards a new status. College-bound high school graduates are separated from home and family as they make their way to college. Upon arrival on campus, they symbolically cross the *limen or threshold* into college. In college, however, though they have entered a new environment where the doors of family, home and high school are closed behind them, they are not immediately fully integrated into the college community as its *bona fide* members. Therefore they are not designated as college students; instead they are separated from the general college community and camped in a place of seclusion, the Polytechnic Auditorium, for a week, and are referred to as *freshers*, *freshmen*. These designations and the act of seclusion for a week’s intensive orientation signified that although college-bound high school graduates have crossed the college threshold and have entered the new college space, they are not as yet ready, adequately equipped, to meaningfully perform college activities. They are like strangers who arrived in a foreign land, and who must first study the area map of the campus, learn its language and culture, its monetary system, its laws and statutes, in order to gain full citizenship.

5.2 The Rite of Transition: The Matriculation Process, Pathway to College Citizenship

Traditionally, *the rite of transition* is performed to mark the period that follows the crossing of the *limen or threshold* into the site of seclusion. This period is therefore appropriately referred to as the *liminal phase* (Turner, 1969). It is the period during which college-bound high school students, having crossed the college threshold into the new college space, experience a break from high school, home and family, and become college ‘freshers’. As freshers, they are not recognized as fully integrated members of the institution. They are treated as *liminars*, that is, those who are on the threshold between a previous and a new social position or status; those in transition, who are betwixt and between, no longer in high school but not yet formally recognized as privileged members of the Polytechnic community. This state and process of mid-transition in the rite of passage is symbolically marked by the ritual of separation and camping of all freshmen for a week’s intensive orientation in

the Auditorium. This act of separation and camping in the Auditorium provided a medium for the acquisition of the critical knowledge freshmen needed to become adequately equipped with, and acclimated to, the culture, academic and social life of the Polytechnic.

The ultimate goal of traditional rites of passage is to resolve life crises by providing means and mechanisms for dealing with the tensions experienced during the liminal phase especially because of its ambiguous nature. Rites of passage are important ritualized events and moments precisely because they facilitate these life course transitions. Taking on a new social and academic identity requires freshmen to negotiate an often-arduous status pathway from high school through college. In most cases, many freshmen are overwhelmed by the mere fact of not being certain about what college holds for them; others see their initial excitement, hopes and expectations shattered because they were unrealistic; still others experience college culture shock because it is the first time they have left home and family to be on their own in a strange college environment. These crises situations are often accentuated during the transition phase if entering students are left to brave the storm all by themselves. Freshmen need to be helped to know the rules of engagement in the new environment.

The Matriculation Process with its component parts provided the necessary rite of passage for the transition or liminal phase. The induction program began the day after students arrived on campus and involved one week intensive orientation for all freshmen in the Polytechnic Auditorium between 9:00 am and 1:30 pm each day. The main objective of the program is to help freshmen become familiar with campus, learn about academic requirements and campus resources and services available to assist them.

The one week intensive Freshman Orientation formed the bedrock of the Matriculation Process and is a compulsory rite of passage that every freshman must undergo. The other components of the Matriculation Process: *Assessment and Placement*; *Counseling Services*; *Academic Advising*; *Freshman Seminars*; *SRC/JCR – Fresher's Week* are important supplementary freshman orientation services that were organized immediately after the week-intensive orientation and are highly recommended for all freshmen to participate in. These services of the Matriculation Process demarked the transition or liminal phase as a period of limitless possibilities for learning, experimentation and discovery of what is needed to take on the new social and academic position as a Polytechnic student.

5.3 Rite of Incorporation: The Matriculation Ceremony As Academic Rite of Incorporation

The *rite of incorporation* traditionally marks the end of the period of seclusion and transition and takes the neophytes through the ritualized passage of reintegration into society. The successful completion of the rites of passage is usually celebrated as a “coming out ceremony” (Tasha, 2011) to mark the reintegration of the neophytes into the society. It is usually an occasion characterized by the reunion of the neophytes with their family and community at large, and is therefore celebrated as a solemn festive occasion of re-incorporation into the community; the whole community celebrates, and rejoices over the fact that the neophytes, having received the vital education and instruction regarding the collective wisdom of the community, are now ready to assume new roles of adult responsibility in the community.

Akin to this traditional rite of reintegration is the *Matriculation Ceremony*, which in this study, stands out as the crowning event of the *Matriculation Process*. The Matriculation Process with its components of Orientation, Assessment and Placement, Counseling Services, Academic Advising, Freshman Seminars, SRC/JCR – Fresher's Week all demarked the freshman transitional or liminal phase as a period of limitless possibilities for learning, experimentation and discovery of the kind of social and academic climate freshmen can reasonably expect to find in the Polytechnic. Having gone through the matriculation process, freshmen are now prepared to deal with the “freshman myth” which according to Brian Harke (2010) results from freshmen's unrealistic expectations. Moreover, the services provided through the components of the matriculation process enabled freshmen to find support networks they can use; connect with other entering students, the student leaders who run the JCR programs, and members of faculty who facilitated the various programs. Thus, like the traditional rites of separation and liminality, the matriculation process served as the academic rite of passage that prepared freshmen to deal with their transitional concerns such as freshman myth, college culture shock, equipping them with the vital information they needed to take on the new status as Polytechnic students and thereby enabling them to become well acclimated to the new Polytechnic environment. Having successfully gone through the various programs of the Matriculation Process, therefore, freshmen are now ready to be formally incorporated into the Polytechnic community. This is done through the Matriculation Ceremony on Saturday 29 November, 2013 as the crowning event that marked the apogee of the Matriculation Process.

5.3.1 Arrival of the Rector's Procession

The Matriculation Ceremony took place at the Polytechnic Auditorium. By 9:00a.m., all freshmen were seated. At exactly 9:30a.m., the Rector's Procession comprising members of the Management Team, Deans of Faculties, Heads of Academic Departments, the Registrar, The Chaplain, and all Senior Members arrived at the Auditorium, mounted the stage and took their seats. All were upstanding.

Then the Chaplain walked to the podium and said the opening prayer. After the prayer, all the matriculates sang *Gaudeamus: Let Us Rejoice*, in Latin.

5.3.2 Presentation of Freshmen/Matriculantes

The presentation of freshmen for the rite of Matriculation was done by the Deans of the various faculties:

- Faculty of Applied Science & Technology
- Faculty of Art and Design
- Faculty of Business and Management Studies
- Faculty of Engineering

Each of the Deans took turns to present the matriculates of their respective Faculties to the Rector.

5.3.3 Administration of Matriculation Oath.

The Matriculation Oath was administered by the Polytechnic Registrar. He invited all the matriculates to be on their feet and to say after him:

I.....having been admitted to Ho Polytechnic, do hereby and hereon solemnly promise and pledge:

That I shall study diligently and foster good relationships with both my colleagues and staff of the Polytechnic;

That I shall not steal, lie, fight, dress indecently or cheat during examinations;

That I shall keep myself from immoral and illegal acts and habits, and that I shall refrain from the use of illicit drugs and beverages;

That I shall not do anything that will bring the Polytechnic into disrepute and that I shall abide by the existing rules and regulations of the Polytechnic and those that shall from time to time be formulated by the Academic Board;

That I shall fulfill all my financial obligations to the Polytechnic.

I make these pledges willingly and without any compulsion and with the full understanding that should I breach any of them, I shall submit myself to the Disciplinary Committee and its decisions as shall be approved by the Academic Board.

I affirm and totally submit myself by signing *The Matriculation Register*, so help me God (Matriculation Hand Book, p.vi).

5.3.4 Rector's Matriculation Pronouncement

After the Oath of Matriculation, the matriculates still up standing, the Rector of the Polytechnic walked to the podium and addressed the matriculates as follows:

By the powers in me vested, I do hereby matriculate you, admitting you to the rights, privileges and responsibilities of the Faculties and Halls of Residence to which you are assigned in the Polytechnic.

5.3.5 Rector's Matriculation Address

The Rector's Matriculation Address focused mainly on the significance of the Matriculation Ceremony, the Matriculation Oath, Rules and Regulations, Mature Application of Freedom and Time Management for Academic Success. The following are excerpts from the Rector's Matriculation address:

Significance of Matriculation Ceremony:

My dear students, now that you have been matriculated, you have become full and recognized members of Ho Polytechnic. I say congratulations and thank you for deciding to study here at Ho Polytechnic, arguably the best Polytechnic in Ghana.

Matriculation is a very important academic event in the life of a student in a tertiary institution. It is the ceremony at which new students are officially received and welcomed into the institution. Matriculation also means a watershed between secondary school and higher education. The ceremony offers the Rector the opportunity to advise all fresh students on their responsibilities, rights and privileges as members of the Polytechnic community. The Fresh students on their part solemnly pledge, by swearing the matriculation oath, to be of good behaviour and to abide by the rules and regulations of the Polytechnic.

Matriculation Oath:

As you have taken the Matriculation Oath today November 29, 2013, you are required to avail yourselves to a regimen of discipline that translates into excellent classroom and laboratory work, hands-on skills and field work, all supervised by highly motivated and dedicated academic staff. The training is to prepare you for a future lucrative career, the quality of which is comparable to those of your peers anywhere in the world.

Rules and Regulations:

To ensure that the right conditions are created for productive academic work, it is expected that your conduct at all times will conform to the rules of good behaviour and to the Polytechnic statutes. The Polytechnic statutes are the rules, regulations, responsibilities and rights that go with membership of the Polytechnic community. These regulations are not to restrict your freedom, rather they are to guide you and ensure that no one infringes on your freedom. You are encouraged to carefully study the *Regulations for Students* and the *Student's Handbook*.

Freedom and Time Management for Success:

As you may have already noticed, there is so much freedom here compared with the secondary schools you are coming from. In secondary school you had the Headmaster, Housemaster and Prefects to guide you, to regulate your movement and use of time. Here in the Polytechnic, there are no parents to watch your back, no rising bell, no compulsory prep time or sleeping hours. You are expected to wake up on your own, prepare for and attend

lectures, do all assignments and practical courses all by yourself. This freedom is not absolute, but comes with a lot of responsibility on your part. For those of you who may want to exploit this freedom negatively, my advice to you is, apply yourself to common sense and manage this freedom, your time, and all other resources, judiciously in order to succeed. (Source: Matriculation Handbook)

5.3.6 Dissolution of Matriculation Assembly

The end of the Matriculation Ceremony was officially marked by the dissolution of the assembly by the Polytechnic Registrar:

Rector, Vice Rector, Deans, Heads of Department, Members of Convocation, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen; The Matriculation Ceremony being over, and in accordance with the Statutes, Rules, Regulations and Conventions of the Polytechnic, I have the honour to declare the 2013/2014 Matriculation Assembly duly dissolved.

5.3.7 Departure of Rector's Procession:

Immediately after the dissolution of the Matriculation Assembly, the Chaplain said the closing prayer and the Rector's Procession which entered the Auditorium with the Rector at the rear, now exited the Auditorium in the reverse order led by the Rector.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The focus of the study has been to explore the theoretical significance of the Matriculation Process as a rite of passage for facilitating the smooth transition of freshmen into college. Viewed through the theoretical lens of rites of passage, the findings, in respect of the Matriculation Process, bear significant similarity with traditional rites of passage both in aim and application. Basically, traditional rites of passage serve as a means or mechanism for dealing with life crisis situations. For this reason rites of passage play a central role in African socialization. In particular, the transition from childhood to adulthood has been held as a major phase in the life cycle because it is the stage at which young people become fully institutionalized in the ethics of the group's culture. Rites of passage, therefore, serve as a mechanism for providing a clear and well-guided pathway for transition from one life stage and sphere of responsibility to another.

Similarly, freshman seminars and orientation programs have been organized in this study as essential components of a Matriculation Process strategically designed as an academic rite of passage to socialize freshmen early in the first semester towards an accurate understanding of the kind of academic and social climate they can reasonably expect to find in the Polytechnic. The analytical framework of rites of passage within which the study was conducted provided the acceptable grounds for identifying various segments of the Matriculation Process with the three main phases of traditional rites of passage: Separation, Transition, and Incorporation. This is in line with Turner's model for cultural performance in complex societies by which the performance event can be divided into ritual phases similar to that which transpires during a rite of passage (Turner, 1990). The significance of this parsing is that it provides an analytical framework for organizing data into phases of ritual performance.

The Separation phase signified detachment; detachment from home, friends, and family. This was a destabilizing and painful experience for many freshmen. Particularly for those who had to leave home for the first time, separation meant moving into a strange and distant environment, surrounded by strangers. This invariably inspired in some cases, a feeling of 'college culture shock.' For many other freshmen, however, crossing the threshold into the new space of the Polytechnic was just another experience of detachment from home, to which they reacted with a feeling of indifference. The camping of freshmen in the Auditorium for a week's intensive orientation demarked the phase of Separation and Seclusion and provided the requisite forum for teaching and learning of the critical knowledge freshmen needed to become adequately socialized in the academic and social culture of the Polytechnic.

The second phase of Transition, Liminality or living on the margin was also experienced by freshmen during the Matriculation Process. Though they had crossed the threshold between home and the Polytechnic, they were not immediately, formally recognized as Polytechnic students; they were designated as *freshmen* or *freshers*. As freshers, they existed in a state of ambiguity as liminars, those betwixt and between, no more in high school, but not yet formally recognized as Polytechnic students. The Transition phase was the most critical and extensive, characterized by experimentation, networking, and discovery. The various components of the Matriculation Process were handy at this juncture to help freshmen to deal with their transitional concerns by providing them with the vital information and resources they needed to take on the new status as Polytechnic students.

The Ceremony of Matriculation provided for the freshmen the opportunity to go through the third phase of the rites of passage, the rite of Incorporation. In a colourful ceremony, dressed in undergraduate gowns, freshmen took the Matriculation Oath, similar to the oath of secrecy in traditional rites of passage. They pledged their loyalty to the Polytechnic; promised to abide by the rules and regulations governing their stay, and to cherish and uphold the mission and vision of the Polytechnic. Finally, they signed the Matriculation Register signifying their formal registration as students of the Polytechnic.

Post-matriculation and evaluation interviews revealed that freshmen found the Matriculation Process very useful as a rite of passage for dealing with their transitional concerns. At the core of the Matriculation Process as a college transition intervention program is the importance of early preparation and communication of realistic expectations for college readiness. As an academic rite of passage, the Matriculation Process ensured the timely provision and communication of accurate information regarding expected knowledge, performance standards, attitudes, and behaviours that freshmen needed in order to be successful in the Polytechnic. This was acknowledged by many freshmen who made special mention of the one week intensive orientation and the SRC – JCR components as providing an optimal forum for addressing many of their transitional concerns. Freshmen particularly reported as having experienced a high comfort level during the transitional period by attending the JCR programs which afforded them a strong peer support group, and helped them feel much more quickly acclimated to the Polytechnic environment. Research by others (Hays & Oxley, 1986) supports the importance of peer networking during the freshman transition. Peer networks do not only provide opportunity for socialization, and peer mentoring, but more importantly, they help freshmen in the negotiation and confirmation of their identity during the transition period (Hirsch, 1980).

This freshman perspective is, therefore, very important for policy decision making in respect of the effectiveness of the various components of the Matriculation Process. Their self-reported appreciation of the program represents a very important factor in determining which elements of the Matriculation Process best contributed to their successful transition to college campus life and what else they think should be done to enhance the transitional intervention process. Due to the ambiguous nature of the transitional phase, freshmen needed both adult role models and their own strong peer group support. Policy decision in respect of a collaborative engagement between Management of the Polytechnic and the SRC – JCR to provide integrated and articulated programs to enhance the Matriculation Process in order to more effectively facilitate a smooth freshman transition will be in the right direction. Such a collaborative effort will not only enable Polytechnic Administrators to more strategically design intervention programs and activities that enhance the Matriculation Process as an academic rite of passage, but will, above all, place at their disposal the various student's peer mentoring resources for the provision of both academic and non academic support during the transition period.

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