

Building Student Success Into Orientation: Fact or Fiction?

Bonita C. Jacobs

Orientation professionals are in the business of student success. We give lip service to our role in orienting students to campus and paving the way for their successes in college. Yet, it's easy to become caught up in room reservations, campus tours, and group activities.

If one wishes to raise the dander of orientation directors, the quickest route is to criticize their programs as merely "fun and games;" in short, accuse them of providing just too much fun. Academicians across campuses are suspect of orientation programs that they perceive as long on entertainment and short on academic preparation.

It should be obvious that an important role of new student orientation is to help students become comfortable with their new environment, become acquainted with other new students, and leave with a feeling of connection to the campus and a sense of having had an enjoyable experience. However, more than ever before, there is a great deal of pressure to provide more assessment and academic preparation during the orientation experience, which is perceived by some orientation professionals as a threat to the positive aspects of a quality program. There is a limited amount of time, and every hour dedicated to testing is an hour less available to the more traditional functions of orientation such as acclimation to campus and developmental education.

So, are both assessment and the pressure to make orientation more academic legitimate concerns? In order to determine the appropriate make-up of the program, it is first important to recognize what function each session serves. An *honest* look at each component of the program is necessary to evaluate whether each is actually contributing to student success and retention.

The balance of the program will vary from campus to campus, with some programs needing to adjust to a more academic curriculum and some needing to promote more campus identity. It is important to recognize whether we are more concerned with information and student success or with simply providing a good time for students. On the other hand, as gatekeepers of the program, orientation directors are responsible for asking how each testing session will create opportunities for student success. Will the results be used for student outcome evaluation, and can the assessment be more appropriately done at a later time? If, in fact, the program is out of balance in either direction, it is the orientation directors' responsibility to initiate a review by campus specialists to determine a more satisfactory balance.

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Even within most sessions, there is a way to integrate developmental and social initiatives with academic concerns. Orientation sets the tone of the campus environment and, no matter how many developmental sessions are done, the subtle messages can undo every educational mission. Peer leaders or professionals who snicker about binge drinking, visitation violations, alcohol abuse, or even the cafeteria food, negate hours of carefully planned programs designed to encourage healthy lifestyles centered around academic goals.

Therefore, with all the assessment we do to evaluate our programs at the *tail end*, perhaps it is time to take a hard look at the program from the *front end*. Can we justify the programs and activities as student success promoters, even if we look at the programs through the eyes of our greatest critics? At this time of year, most of us are putting finishing touches on our planning, and it is a good time to get back to the basics. We need to determine, first and foremost, if our programs promote long-term student success despite the fact that the students are having just too much fun!

ARTICLE

The Dynamics of Creating a Freshman Year Program: A Decade of Reflection

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The development and growth of successful freshman orientation courses often require nurturing campus-wide networks and building administrative support through both academic and student affairs. This article chronicles the evolution of such efforts at a large midwestern public university that begins as a pilot project with only thirteen students enrolled in a course limited to specific majors, and evolves to a campus-wide program involving an extended orientation course, a mentoring program, and a faculty and staff training workshop. The article specifically reflects on the dynamics of developing campus-wide partnerships in the curricular development.

In his book, *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*, Ernest Boyer (1987) reported findings of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that addressed the importance orientation plays in assisting students in their university experience. Boyer ultimately proposed that "all colleges offer a short-term credit course for new students" (p.48), and Terenzini (1993) concluded that this would help "create a more supportive atmosphere during students' first year of college life" (p. 11).

Over the years, researchers (Banziger, 1987; Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; Cuseo, 1991; Gardner, 1989; Gordon & Grites, 1984; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolffe, 1986) also have advocated the freshman orientation course as a means to assist students in their transitions to and successes in college. Moreover, extensive research supports the fact that freshman orientation courses and seminars increase student retention and success (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; Fidler, 1986; Fidler & Hunter, 1989; House & Kuchynka, 1997; Murphy, 1989; Strumpf & Hunt, 1993). Not surprisingly, Barefoot & Fidler (1996) reported that 72% of 720 institutions responding to the 1994 National Survey of Freshman Seminar Programming indicated their campuses offered extended orientation or college survival seminars.

Clearly, a body of literature supports the concept of freshman orientation courses and the valuable role they play in student integration and retention. Even so, faculty and administrators frequently encounter difficulties when developing and implementing freshman orientation courses for college credit. The course may be challenged by campus politics and by common objections that such courses "coddle" students and are "remedial" (Gardner, 1989).

In this regard, some literature has focused on the process of developing and implementing freshman orientation courses, especially as it relates to campus politics. Gordon

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