

Becoming an Orientation Professional: A New Kind of Transition A Personal Journey

Carrie Rosenstein

Orientation leaders and graduate assistants work in paraprofessional roles to help ease student transition from high school to college. They address concerns, ease fears, identify campus resources, and acclimate students to the new environment. Does working in this capacity prepare them for transitional situations they might face themselves?

When I first became involved in orientation as an undergraduate student orientation leader, I did not realize that the experience would shape my professional future. My involvement with orientation led me to a graduate program in higher education administration and a graduate assistantship in an orientation office. I spent two years learning about higher education and student affairs. I also gained valuable practical experience in student orientation and first year student programming. I attended workshops and conferences that aimed to enhance my professionalism and prepared me to work as a student affairs practitioner.

The graduate program was strong; one in which the professors had a genuine interest in the students, the student affairs practitioners entrusted graduate assistants with professional-level responsibility, and the opportunities for professional development were plentiful. However, there is no preparation that can simulate the feeling of being a new orientation professional on a foreign campus.

Soon after graduation I accepted a position as an Assistant Director of Orientation and Campus Information at a large, public, four-year institution in the Midwest. My emotions ran the gamut, but mostly I felt excited. I packed my belongings in boxes, making sure to neatly label the ones that contained graduate school textbooks and resources. After all, I would have an office to fill. Less than one week before my start date, I made the move from the comforts of my Southeastern home. I would have been in the South my entire life and did not know anyone living in the city or even the state that I would now call home. As I moved, I began to feel nervous as I contemplated the upcoming challenge. I made the move to the new town just days before my start date, quickly settled in, and reported to my new office. The professional staff and students were welcoming and determined to make my transition smooth. My desk was adorned with college paraphernalia and my office with welcome banners. They went above and beyond what would be expected of colleagues, making sure I felt comfortable in my new surroundings.

Carrie Rosenstein is the Assistant Director for Orientation and Campus Information at Northern Illinois University, Dekalb, IL

Though the new institution type was nearly identical to my previous school and the orientation program and philosophy were similar, I could sense that there would be a period of adjustment. I needed to learn how to be a professional.

I loaded my bookshelves with my textbooks and journals, displayed my new business cards on my desk, and hung my diplomas on the wall. This would aid in my professional image, but did it little to make my newfound sense of autonomy feel comfortable. I needed to feel at ease in my position and confident that I was capable of fulfilling the demands and expectations. I was not accustomed to making independent decisions, writing my own memos and letters, and having my own telephone and voice mail. In the beginning, I constantly looked to my supervisor for approval. I felt like she always needed to give the final approval. I included her name on all memos and letters and made sure she had the opportunity to edit any information necessary. With time this felt less necessary and I began to feel my judgment was sufficient.

Another challenge I faced was gaining exposure on campus. During my first week, I met employees from all over campus. So many in fact, that most of them became a blur. Everyone looked familiar to me; I just could not place their names with their faces and university departments. In turn, they did not always recognize me. At times it even felt awkward to walk around campus, not knowing my bearings or my fellow university employees. The more I was exposed to other office members, whether through meetings or run-ins in the cafeteria, the more they would initiate conversation when walking across campus. The campus began to feel more comfortable. My interactions with faculty and staff began to feel natural, but there was still yet another difficulty: finding a network of friends. Being in my early twenties, there was not much separating me from the tens of thousands of students walking across campus. I still was able to relate to both undergraduate and graduate students. Socially, I had more in common with graduate students than with many of the professional staff members I met. Initially I debated whether or not it was appropriate to socialize with our office's graduate assistants outside of work. I strongly wanted to maintain a high level of professionalism, but equally wanted to build a network of friends. Since my overall attitude and morale is effected by factors inside and outside of the workplace, I decided to do what was best for me. While still trying to connect with other new professionals on a social level, I felt it was acceptable to also socialize with graduate assistants.

I have been here a year now and finally know what it takes to become a professional in the field of orientation: support and challenge. The experience of becoming a professional can be likened to that of becoming a successful college student. Evans (1996) summarized Sanford's theory of support and challenge well when she wrote

Sanford suggested a balance of challenge and support must be present for development to occur. If there is too little challenge, the individual may feel safe and comfortable, but development will not take place. On the other hand, too much challenge can induce maladaptive responses. (p.167)

Over the course of a year being challenged allowed me to expand my boundaries

and explore new ideas. Challenge led to my comfort in starting new programs and bringing new ideas to the table. The support allowed me to trust my instincts and myself. As I start my second year in the profession, I no longer need to rely on packed bookshelves and business cards to relay my professionalism to the public. I can accomplish that through voicing my opinions in meetings, attending professional conferences and presenting programs, and by gaining the trust and respect of my colleagues at my own campus.

These are lessons learned through life experience, not through textbooks.

References

Evans, N. (1996). Theories of student development. In Komives, S.R., Dudley, D.B. & Associates (Eds.), *Student services: A handbook for the profession (3rd ed. pp. 164-187)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.