

New Faculty Orientation: Creating Transitions that Work

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Colleges and universities increasingly rely on faculty quality as a measure of institutional self-worth (Bai, 1999; Tien & Blackburn, 1996). The faculty, broadly defined, provide the teaching, research, and service which connects an institution to its surrounding environment, whether defined as a city, state, or academic discipline. Accepting the notion of faculty quality as an indicator of institutional quality, there is a paramount need to for the institution to invest in faculty at all stages of their careers. As argued by Nadler and Miller (1994), continued faculty growth and performance need to be early components of a faculty member's academic career, and actually begin when the faculty member steps foot on campus. Largely, this is a transitional phase in the development of a faculty member, and subsequently, institutions have a responsibility to create an atmosphere, environment, and culture that helps faculty members succeed.

The concern for the College of Education at San Jose State University has been somewhat more complex than facing the need for long-term faculty growth. With competitive salaries and competitive higher education institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area, there is a need to quickly embrace new faculty members and to provide them with the tools they will need to succeed. San Jose State University also is classified as a "minority-majority" campus, where minority enrollments exceed the non-minority enrollments, and the university is a member of the 23-campus California State University, the largest state system in the United States. Combining these two factors with a population in San Jose that now ranks it as the nation's eleventh largest city, faculty members can feel disoriented and frustrated. The College of Education acknowledged these frustrations and immediately set to work on a program of orienting new faculty to their academic assignment and life in San Jose.

For heuristic purposes, the College of Education at SJSU enrolls approximately 1,600 students and has 85 faculty members. The College is primarily graduate-oriented, and offers only two undergraduate majors. The bulk of the College's enrollment is in the Division of Teacher Education, which, as the name implies, primarily prepares teachers for elementary and secondary school teaching posts. Other divisions in the College include Educational Leadership and Development, Child Development, and Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. The College welcomes between eight and twelve new faculty members each year. San Jose State University, located in downtown San Jose, in the heart of the Silicon Valley, enrolls approximately 31,000 students in eight academic colleges.

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What We Did

Under the leadership of the dean, the College's executive team, comprised of those reporting to the dean, devised a plan to improve the orientation of new faculty members. The first step in this planning was a comprehensive assessment of the existing, university-wide faculty orientation program. This three and a half day program was coordinated by the Office of the Provost and focused on both the technical (what format to use for syllabi and how to get parking decals) to the team-building (social events, shared meals, etc.). The feedback from the executive team noted that new faculty members were not presented a strong College-based affiliation when they began the orientation program, and hence, team building and community building were taking place, but were taking place outside of the College. One focus, then, became to create a system that fostered community among those faculty members new to the College of Education. A second major concern that arose from the assessment was the need for concrete, specific examples of material development for those in the social sciences (such as syllabi, tenure and promotion materials, internal grant requests, etc.). This second concern arose out of frequent questioning and the observation that despite the institution's orientation program, many faculty members in the College were not drawing from that experience the answers to common questions. A third priority arising from the assessment was the need to present consistent, accurate information in a meaningful fashion to new faculty. In talking to senior faculty in different divisions, as noted by the division directors, inconsistent information was among the greatest challenges new faculty encountered.

Primary Criteria for Us

The College's response was to put together a one-half day program and social event exclusively for the College's new faculty. Including the divisional directors in all events, the program was described as having a feeling of seriousness and authenticity. Additionally, the dean's presence provided a strong sense of importance to the new faculty. The orientation program was coordinated by the Office of the Dean in the College, with primary responsibility falling on the associate deans.

The program was based on a resource manual compiled especially for the orientation program (see Figure 1 for listing of topics included in the manual). This manual was then used to build a conversation among new faculty members and guide a conversation led by the associate dean and dean. Refreshments were served, and a real estate agent was also added to the agenda to address concerns about housing prices in Silicon Valley.

The theme of the program, stressed through conversation and by highlight sections of the manual, were the practical, pragmatic issues of: how to get money for professional travel, what has to be done for tenure and promotion documents, and where to look for answers to frequently asked questions. The program lasted approximately four hours. In the first year of the new faculty orientation, the College held the program off-campus, but moved it back on campus in fall 2000 to allow for greater flexibility of scheduling small group discussions.

The orientation program concluded with a dinner, paid for by the College, for all new faculty and their spouses or significant others and the divisional directors and dean's office staff. The idea was to bring together people from across the city that would not otherwise have an opportunity to meet and socialize.

FIGURE 1

Topics Included in New Faculty Orientation Manual

SJSU Facts	Change Grade Form	International Programs
Mission Statement	Annual Evaluation	Payroll Information
Organizational Charts	Policy S98-8	Benefits Summary
Academic Senate Facts	Alternative Scholarship	Retirement Information
Committees	Dossier Contents	Travel
Academic Calendars	Merit and Service Salary Increases	Faculty Handbook
Enrollment History	Technology	Library Materials
Sample Student Teaching Eval	Knowledge Base	Useful Phone Numbers
Textbook Order Form	Grants	Ordering Business Cards
Sample Greensheet	Student Scholarships	Miscellaneous

Conclusions

The original intention of the new faculty orientation was to bring individuals from different settings together, to begin to build a community in the College, and particularly, to begin to address issues of attrition. The program developed by the College was the first to be initiated by an individual academic unit at SJSU, and faculty have informally reported that they believe it is worthwhile and meaningful. The true impact of the program is yet to be determined, but at the very least sets the tone of the discussion about what each division should be giving attention to. The general themes of building community, creating unity and teaming, technical instruction have been picked up throughout the College. The program has only gone through two cycles, but is being repeated again in 2001, and offers what the program designers believe to be a good first step at organizing College-wide faculty development.

References

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