New Student Satisfaction with an Orientation Program: Creating Effective Learning Transitions

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Divisions of student affairs have responsibility for both the development of college students outside of their classes, and in the provision of the tools necessary for success in the classroom. These divisions have historically encompassed a broad array of activities and services, and most recently, have found their function closely aligned to finding ways to help students succeed (Gardner & Hansen, 1993). In response to this focus, divisional activities have increasingly been directed at experiences and activities that build retention, foster academic skills, provide opportunities for peer-interaction, encourage student maturation and development, and among other things, provide a cultural awareness and broadening world view. To accomplish this host of tasks, a wide array of programs are developed and offered, including new student orientation programs.

New student orientation programs conceptually are a device that allow students to be impacted immediately in their association with an institution, and front-loads divisional programming in interacting with students (Mullendore, 1992). New student orientation programs are designed to accomplish a number of activities. These range from creating an 'espirit de corps' among new students (Twale, 1989) to conveying institutional expectations of learning, appropriate behavior, and civic responsibility to new students (Mullendore,1992). Diverse, often conflicting new student needs coupled with multiple institutional expectations can dilute orientation programming to the extent that student needs are not met (Ong, 2000). Indeed, changing student demographics and profiles can create a very different orientation expectation than in past years (Johnson & Miller, 2000; Loeb, 1994).

New student orientation programs typically fall into one of several categories, including pre-enrollment programs where the orientation serves as a recruitment as well as transitional program and pre-semester programs where the program transitions students into the new semester during a multi-day 'event' program. One of the results of these differences, as well as the differences between types of institutions, is a general lack of commonality between programs and among the orientation community in general. Based on conferences such as the National Orientation Director's Association Conference (NODAC), there is a general understanding of what orientation programs are supposed to do, that is, to provide a meaningful experience that helps transition students to their new academic environment while simultaneously providing academic and social

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tools for success.

The spectrum of orientation designs is broad, including the involvement of faculty in teaching how to study, to college deans providing lessons on how to succeed in and out of the classroom. There are football coaches who provide motivational speeches and there are college presidents who spend the first night of the semester in residence halls. All of these types of activities are designed for a number of reasons, and orientation programs have been identified as a key to academic achievement and retention to matriculation. Stephenson (1997) reinforced this finding, noting that students who complete a first-year university success course are much more likely to complete their degree and maintain higher grade point averages. He also found that the students who successfully completed a first-year student success course were more likely to continue enrollment through completion of either an associates degree or transfer to a four-year college.

Regardless of the success stories surrounding orientation programs, there is little consensus on what specifically they are supposed to accomplish (Nadler & Miller, 1999), and although students typically enjoy orientation programs and report having their needs met, there is little national, nor typically institutional, consensus on the objectives of orientation programming. The current study was designed to explore one orientation program at a major private university in the southeastern United States, to gather student perceptions of how successful the program was in meeting the guidelines spelled out by the Council for the Advancement Standards, and to identify possible themes in student participant responses. Findings of this nature can be helpful in determining what orientation programs should be attempting to accomplish, in addition to providing important feedback data on the structure of an orientation program.

Methods

Data were collected during the Fall 2000 orientation program at a major southeastern research university in an urban setting. The program was a four-day offering with multiple tracks of educational and entertainment sessions, and focused on team-building and community development for new students while simultaneously working to develop study skills necessary for academic success. The case study institution enrolled approximately 10,000 students, has been considered moderately to highly selective, and is situated in an urban setting. These dimensions may have a limiting effect on the results of the study. The orientation program in place at the case study institution was developed in cooperation between a professional orientation staff members, student volunteer orientation team leaders, and has had consultation from other professionals within the division of student affairs.

To collect data, a research-team designed survey instrument was constructed. The instrument first contained the 20 items that comprise the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) Standards for New Student Orientation. These standards were devel-oped as a guiding framework for new student orientation programs by senior student affairs administrators in the mid-1980s, and offered to the professional community as a means of beginning to develop consensus about what orientation programs are supposed

to be doing (CAS, 1988). Students were asked to rate their satisfaction that the orientation program they had just gone through accomplished these orientation objectives. Students used a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale to rate their perceptions of the orientation, where 1=Strong Disagreement, progressing to 5=Strong Agreement. The second section of the survey included a listing of orientation activities and services, and students were asked to identify their satisfaction with each on the same 1-to-5 Likert-type scale already described.

Of the approximately 1,300 new students entering the institution in the fall of 2000, 1,048 (80%) completed and returned a usable survey questionnaire. Surveys were distributed by orientation team leaders at the final orientation group meeting of the multiple-day program. The surveys were distributed, completed, and immediately returned, which is what accounted for the high level of participation. The researchers had previously used the survey instrument on the same sample in two different years, and the instrument was determined to be valid and reliable.

Findings

Orientation Objectives

Although the orientation program was developed independently of the CAS Standards and was constructed around a combination of history and informal needs analysis, students participating in orientation rated their perceived agreement level that each of the CAS Standards was met as an objective. The overall mean rating for all 20-objectives was 3.80 on the 5.0 (Strong Agreement) scale. Four of the 20 orientation objectives had overall mean ratings of 4.0 or higher. These four objectives included assisted in developing positive relationships with other new students (mean 4.28; SD .7868), provided information about academic policies (mean 4.14, SD .8504), assisted in developing familiarity with campus physical surroundings (mean 4.07, SD .8480), and promoted an awareness of non-classroom opportunities (mean 4.04, SD .7139; see Table 1).

An exploratory factor analysis was completed using the SPSS Factor Analysis program. This process allowed the computer to generate categories based on responses, rather than relying on researcher hypotheses for the creation of categories. The program generated two clusters for orientation goals and three clusters for orientation activities and services. The clusters generated consisted of items that were in some way related and could be analyzed and labeled appropriately.

Through a factor analysis using a varimax rotation, orientation goals grouped into two clusters based upon similarities in responses (as shown in Table 2). Each cluster was composed of ten orientation goals. The two identified clusters accounted for approximately 46% of the variance. Factor one for orientation goals consisted of assisted me in developing familiarity with the physical surroundings, created an atmosphere that minimized anxiety, promoted positive attitudes, and stimulated an excitement for learning, provided information and exposure to available institutional services, promoted an awareness of non-classroom opportunities, provided appropriate information on

personal safety and security, provided information concerning academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs, provided an atmosphere and sufficient information that enabled me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions, assisted me in developing positive relationships with other new students, provided opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students, and explained the process for class scheduling and registration. The cluster emphasized the information needed for newly enrolled students, and reinforced the importance that students can make more informed decisions if given the appropriate information and an opportunity to do so.

Factor two for orientation goals consisted of assisted me in understanding the mission of the institution (i.e. research, teaching, and service), assisted me in determining my purpose(s) in attending the institution, assisted me in developing positive relationships with institution faculty, assisted me in understanding the purpose(s) of the institution (i.e. academic or career), assisted me in developing positive relationships with the institution staff, provided information about opportunities for self-assessment, assisted me in understanding institution's expectations of me, assisted me in identifying cost of attending institution, both in terms of dollars and personal commitment, provided referrals to qualified advisers and counselors, and assisted me in developing positive relationships with individuals from my community. This second factor emphasized building a relationship and developing a sense of community, and reinforced the importance of developing a relationship between the student and institution that in turn gives the student a sense of comfort and a feeling of belonging to a community that promotes their best interest.

Activities and Services

A total of 15 university services were included during the new student orientation, along with two summative statements, including the overall rating of university services orientation, and overall program orientation. These 17 statements had an overall mean rating score of 3.83 on the 1-to-5 Likert-type scale. As shown in Table 3, students completing the new student orientation program agreed-to-strongly agreed that the new student orientation did a good job of providing an orientation to four activities, including hypnotist (mean 4.47, SD 1.0139), residence hall move in (mean 4.27, SD .9382), orientation coordinator (mean 4.27, SD 1.1606), and river boat cruise (mean 4.02, SD .7116). Students rated the orientation of university services overall at the 4.02 level, and the entire orientation program was provided a 3.96 rating.

When a factor analysis was performed to combine items and identify similarities among the orientation activities and services, the 14 activities and services reduced to three clusters as shown in Table 4. Each cluster was composed of five to seven activities and services. Factor one of the activities consisted of accounts receivable, computing services, financial aid, overall university services, and food services. This cluster represented the overall rating of the institutions services and emphasized the need for quality service components of the institution.

Factor two for orientation activities and services consisted of residence hall move-in, overall rating of the program or the orientation program, orientation coordinator,

welcoming convocation, and registration. This cluster represented entry into the system, and reinforced the importance of making a smooth transition to the institution for new students.

The third cluster identified for orientation activities and services was composed of first impressions, being safe, campus tour, institution traditions, academic advisement, river boat dessert cruise, and hypnotist. This cluster represented entertainment provided during the orientation process, and emphasized the importance of socializing the student in areas other than academics.

Discussion

The profile of college students coming to campus has and will continue to evolve. The students on campus today are vastly different from their counterparts of 100 or even 50 years ago, and divisions of student affairs need to understand these changes and adapt programming respectively. New student orientation programs have been called upon to increase academic performance, build a sense of peer-based community, teach new students about registering for classes and paying bills, and keeping students on campus through graduation. These demands are often placed on programs that last two, three, or four days. Orientation seems to have responded by building university success or 101-type courses, essentially attempting to expand programming to meet these myriad needs. The larger result, though, is that orientation programs keep trying to do more and more without critically reflecting on their purpose or mission.

The current study is a good first step in creating a meaningful dialogue about what orientation programs do and are supposed to do. Not surprisingly, new students at the case study institution agreed to strongly agreed that the program they completed met the needs spelled out by the CAS Standards. Further, neutral perceptions were commonplace, representing an "I guess so" mentality by new students and indicating that the students themselves are probably not certain what it is they were supposed to encounter in the new student orientation program. The direction offered by Mullendore and Twale in prescribing specific tasks for new student orientation programs seemed to be lacking, as new students basic expectation is not 'success' but 'survival.' Institutions, through divisions of student affairs, need to become active in responding to this need, and need to be more aggressive in defining the academic and personal needs that will allow the conversation about transitions to shift back to student success.

The clusters identified in the goals section of the survey highlight the commentary about giving meaning to new student orientation. Half of the responses by new students are focused on how to make decisions, not specific content about institutional life. New students to some extent are saying that they are trying to learn about themselves and how to find the criteria and values necessary for making the right decisions in college. The second cluster represents the immediate need of the day, the need of fitting in, belonging, and making friends. These clusters reinforce the immediate divisional response of creating more orientation and transition programming in the form of university life courses by suggesting that the meaning of orientation is teaching about how to live on campus. Larger questions about campus citizenship and responsibility could be

interesting dimensions to new student orientation programs, and could begin an important parallel conversation about student democracy and self-governance on campus.

The factor analysis on activities and services represents positive and confusing results for those constructing orientation programs. The patterns of responses from one perspective offer consistency with services, system entry and entertainment, yet also suggest that important technical information may be getting lost in an attempt to do many different things. For example, academic advising resulting in the same cluster as an entertaining hypnotist may suggest that the orientation program is not differentiating between academic attention and general programming. Depending on the nature of the institution and the expectation of the orientation program, this may or may not prove problematic.

Orientation programs need to look constructively at their activities and can at least spatially identify what it is they are trying to accomplish. Unfortunately, as college campuses become increasingly complex communities and students are treated like customers rather than learners, orientation and other transitional programs must change, grow, and evolve to meet diverse demands. Leadership from students and student affairs professionals must be provided to maintain the integrity of programs, namely, assuring that new student success will be the priority for programs, and that institutions continue to reflect a caring, nurturing, learning-focused perspective on students.

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TABLE 1

Ratings of Orientation Goals
N=1,048

Orientation Goals	Mean	SD
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with other new students	4.28	.7868
Provided information concerning academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs	4.14	.8504
Assisted me in developing familiarity with the physical surroundings	4.07	.8480
Promoted an awareness of non-classroom opportunities	4.04	.7139
Provided appropriate information on personal safety and security	3.99	.8413
Created an atmosphere that minimized anxiety, promoted positive attitudes, and stimulated an excitement for learning	3.98	.9564
Assisted me in understanding institution's expectations of me	3.94	.8518
Provided an atmosphere and sufficient information that enabled me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions	3.86	.8370
Provided information and exposure to available institutional services	3.86	.9580
Assisted me in understanding the purpose(s) of institution (i.e. academic or career)	3.83	1.0475
Provided opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students	3.76	.9276
Explained the process for class scheduling and registration	3.74	.8281

Orientation Goals	Mean	SD
Assisted me in understanding the mission of institution (research, teaching and service)	3.72	.9980
Assisted me in determining my purpose(s) in attending institution	3.69	1.0445
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with individuals from my community	3.67	.9447
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with institution's staff	3.59	1.0349
Provided information about opportunities for self-assessment	3.58	.9837
Provided referrals to qualified advisers and counselors	3.48	1.0223
Assisted me in identifying costs of attending institution, both in terms of dollars and personal commitment	3.47	1.0304
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with institution's faculty	3.44	.8233

TABLE 2

Varimax Factor Analysis of Orientation Goals

Orientation Goals	Factor 1	Factor 2
Information for Decision-Making		
Assisted me in developing familiarity with the physical surroundings	.731	
Created an atmosphere that minimized Anxiety, promoted positive attitudes, and Stimulated an excitement for learning	.710	
Provided information and exposure to available institutional services	.660	
Promoted an awareness of non-classroom opportunities	.642	
Provided appropriate information on personal safety and security	.603	
Provided information concerning academic policies, procedures, requirements and programs	.594	
Provided an atmosphere and sufficient information that enabled me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions	.588	
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with other new students	.553	
Provided opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students	.553	
Explained the process for class scheduling and registration	.464	
Relationships and Sense of Community		
Assisted me in understanding the mission of the institution (i.e. research, teaching, and service)		.752

Orientation Goals	Factor 1	Factor 2
Assisted me in determining my purpose(s) in attending institution		.720
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with institution faculty		.719
Assisted me in understanding the purpose(s) of institution (i.e. academic or career)		.709
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with institution staff		.688
Provided information about opportunities for self-assessment		.559
Assisted me in understanding institution's expectations of me		.518
Assisted me in identify costs of attending institution, both in terms of dollars and personal commitment		.474
Provided referrals to qualified advisers and counselors		.433
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with individuals from my community		.424

TABLE 3

Ratings of Orientation Activities and Services
N=1,048

Activities and Services	Mean	SD
Residence Hall Move-In	4.27	.9382
Welcoming Convocation	3.72	.8129
Academic Advisement	3.37	1.1746
Registration	3.70	.9805
Overall University Services	4.02	.7619
Accounts Receivable	3.86	.8974
Computing Services	3.65	.9487
Financial Aid	3.73	.9281
Food Services	3.85	1.0926
Being Safe	3.56	1.1954
First Impressions	3.71	.9633
Campus Tour	3.62	.9430
Orientation Coordinator	4.27	1.1606
Hypnotist	4.47	1.0139
River Boat Cruise	4.02	.7116
Institution's Traditions	3.40	.8238
Overall Rating of Program	3.96	.7732

TABLE 4

Varimax Factor Analysis for Activities and Services

Orientation Goals	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Services			
Accounts Receivable	.763		
Computing Services	.757		
Financial Aid	.720		
Overall University Services	.629		
Food Services	.572		
Entry Into the System			
Residence Hall Move-In		.714	
Overall Rating of Program		.675	
Orientation Coordinator		.624	
Academic Advisement		.579	
Registration		.484	
Entertainment			
First Impressions			.696
Being Safe			.683
Campus Tour			.620
Institution Traditions			.577
Academic Advisement			.471
River Boat Cruise			.458
Hypnotist			.443