

## Essential Elements for New Student Orientation: The Perspective of Secondary School Personnel

*Matthew A. Capps and Michael T. Miller*

*New student orientation programs typically have been developed from the perspective of what new students need upon their arrival on a 4-year college campus. There is little consideration given to the environment from which students come, namely, the secondary and high schools from which students graduate. The current study explores what secondary school administrators perceive to be the most important elements that should be included in an orientation program. This perspective, which largely supports the inclusion of all the Council for the Advancement of Standards' Standards for New Student Orientation, particularly noted the need for orientation programs to help the student identify the personal and financial costs (and benefits) of attending college.*

The retention of college students is a major challenge for higher education, as nationally fewer than 45% of all first-time college students graduate within 5 years of beginning their studies (Adelman, 2004). State legislators, boards of trustees, parents, and college administrators all have expressed concern for student matriculation issues, and these have been manifested in funding formulas that are correlated to retention and graduation rates, tuition incentives for timely degree progress, and supplemental funding for programs that have high matriculation rates. College administrators also have explored a number of strategies designed to increase student success on campus, and in many instances, new student orientation and transitional programs have been put into place as the first step in getting students engaged in the campus community.

New student orientation and transition programs have been designed in a number of formats. Some are short, intensive pre-enrollment exposure to campus programs while others are weeklong pre-semester programs designed to build community among new students. Summer and pre-semester programming are only part of new student orientation programs, as increasingly colleges are building and requiring academic coursework designed to help students learn to study, use campus resources, and have a smooth transition into their environments.

New student orientation and transitional programs have been difficult to assess and to identify the impact of various programming. In the mid-1980s the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) brought together the thinking of senior student affairs professionals and constructed a set of Standards for New Student Orientation. These standards have often been the framework by which programs are designed and evaluated

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**Matthew A. Capps** (mcapps@uark.edu) is an assistant professor of Educational Administration and **Michael T. Miller** (mtmille@uark.edu) is a professor, both in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of Arkansas.

(Nadler & Miller, 1995). One major difficulty in using these standards when building orientation programming is that they typically are examined only from the perspective of current college students, college faculty, and administrators. Although these are indeed key constituents to consider in building orientation programs, there is also legitimacy in examining where students have come from. Many first-time, first-semester college students at 4-year colleges and universities come directly from a secondary school experience, and this background can be a strong predictor of college student success. Newman (1994) particularly noted the influence of secondary school teachers and administrators on college student success, describing those relationships as important and meaningful in creating an academic value system.

The purpose for conducting the current study was to identify and describe what secondary school administrators perceive to be important in new student orientation programs. By identifying areas that they believe should be addressed in new student orientation programs to help students succeed, college student affairs specialists can begin to look for connections and disconnections between where students have come from and what types of programs and initiatives are particularly appropriate in bridging the transition.

## **Orientation: Why, Where, When?**

### Traditional Elements

Orientation and transitional programs are designed to accomplish a variety of purposes in a variety of ways. As indicated, they range from brief one-day technically-focused programs on how to pay tuition bills and where to park to weeklong activities that have bonfires, pep rallies, and sessions on study skills and mentoring. Many institutions also have built in Web-based online components so that incoming students can begin their adjustment to college before leaving home. Also, many campuses have begun offering outdoor, recreation-focused orientation programs that build community and a sense of teamwork, and establish strong friendships among incoming students.

Orientation and transitional programs have a variety of goals and expected outcomes. At some colleges and universities, these are tied to enrollment persistence; at others the outcomes are geared to out-of-classroom learning objectives that deal with issues such as accepting and celebrating diversity, social structure development (Twale, 1989), interpersonal skill development, and life skills in such areas as personal financial and career management.

There is no particular model used for creating orientation and transitional programs, as such work is typically designed to meet the unique needs and expectations of students at individual campuses. Despite the individuality, there are a number of opportunities for student affairs professionals to learn from each other and to identify best practice approaches that might be adopted at other institutions. Most notably, the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) regularly describes programs at its annual

national meeting. This strongly suggests that the higher education community is largely introspective in developing programs for first-time new students.

## The Disconnect

Approximately half of all graduating high school students go on to some form of postsecondary education, including 4-year colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Although these students meet admissions requirements at their colleges, the majority drop or stop out (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2003). This phenomenon suggests that for some reason the student who was successful in secondary school becomes unsuccessful at college. A variety of factors can be linked to this, including a newfound independence, personal management, and intellectual ability (Karp, Holmstrom, & Gray, 1998). Higher education typically does not look to the secondary school environment for help in identifying why students are successful or unsuccessful, but typically blame the secondary school for failing to adequately prepare students. Indeed, remedial instruction has grown in college (Kirst & Bracco, 2004), yet there continues to be little conversation between the two segments of higher education about how to address this type of problem (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005).

The disconnect between secondary education and higher education has been described in such reports as Stanford University's Bridge Project, a policy-based study into secondary school and higher education collaboration and articulation that found virtually no evidence of collaboration between secondary and higher education (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). As part of this lack of collaboration, college professors and secondary school teachers rarely have a strong sense of what is expected of each other (Kirst & Bracco, 2004). This thinking has been highlighted in many of the educational reform efforts that align secondary school curriculum and standards either in opposition and at least not in alignment with higher education curricular expectations (Linn, 2000). Also, few secondary education systems collaborate with higher education to give any indication as to how students from particular high schools do once they are in college (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). This makes it virtually impossible to verify that college preparation tracks within secondary schools are effective or doing their job in preparing students for college (Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003).

## Research Methods

In this exploratory study, descriptive data were sought to explain how secondary school personnel perceived what should be included in new student orientation programs for first-time, 4-year college students at primarily residential universities. The protocol for collecting data was reliant on an interpretation of the CAS Standards, as developed in previous research (Haden, Bai, Nadler, Miller, & Dyer, 2004; Miller, Dyer, & Nadler, 2002). A modification of an instrument that had been determined to be a valid and reliable mechanism for identifying orientation program priority elements (Haden, 2004), this survey was distributed to 250 secondary school personnel in

Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. These individuals held a variety of titles, including guidance counselor, department chair, assistant/associate superintendent or principal, and superintendent and principal. The purposive sample was selected on the willingness of districts to participate in the dissemination and collection of the instrument. All data were collected in fall 2005.

The survey instrument specifically included the 20 CAS Standards. These standards were developed in the mid-1980s by senior student affairs officers as goals or intentions for new student orientation programs (CAS, 1988). Respondents in the current study were asked to rate their level of agreement with each item on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 1 = strong disagreement (the item should not be included in a new student orientation), progressing to 5 = strong agreement (the item should definitely be included in a new student orientation program). Respondents were also asked to carefully consider their impressions and experiences of secondary school students and how they would progress into a higher education environment.

To further validate the use of the instrument in this context, it was distributed for review by a panel of secondary school administrators not involved in the study. They suggested minor wording changes, and these were made prior to the survey distribution.

## Findings

As shown in Table 1, 219 respondents completed usable survey instruments to be used in data analysis. Over two thirds of the respondents were counselors, and just over half of the respondents (51%) were female.

As a group, respondents agreed most strongly with several items that dealt with establishing an expectation for student behavior. Assisting students in identifying the financial and commitment costs of attending college was the most strongly agreed to item ( $M = 4.50$ , see Table 2), followed by the technical aspect of explaining class scheduling ( $M = 4.47$ ). Secondary school administrators also agreed that the new student orientation program should provide information on academic policies ( $M = 4.47$ ), create an anxiety reduced atmosphere ( $M = 4.46$ ), and provide information on how to make decisions ( $M = 4.45$ ). Conversely, these respondents agreed least strongly with assisting students' understanding of the mission of the college ( $M = 3.57$ ), developing positive relationships in the community ( $M = 3.72$ ), and providing opportunities for self-assessment ( $M = 3.94$ ).

There has been some suggestion that men and women view the orientation process differently, and that orientation might serve different purposes based on gender (Dyer, Nadler, & Miller, 2000). To explore this line of inquiry further, data were stratified and examined based on the gender of the respondents. This procedure allowed for some additional in-depth observation about male and female school administrators' perceptions regarding the transition of new students to college.

The women in administrative positions in secondary schools who participated in the study agreed most strongly that new student college orientation programs should work to create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety and promotes positive attitudes ( $M = 4.54$ ;

see Table 3). These women disagreed most with the idea that orientation should assist in understanding the mission of the college ( $M = 3.51$ ). Men who participated in the study, however, agreed most strongly with using orientation to provide information about academic policies ( $M = 4.50$ ) and they disagreed most strongly with using orientation to assist the new student in developing positive relationships with new communities ( $M = 3.66$ ). Using a one-way analysis of variance procedure (ANOVA), only one statistically significant difference was identified in comparing the mean scores of female and male respondents (at the .05 level;  $f = .003$ ). The difference was identified between the ratings of using orientation to assist the student in developing positive relations with other new students. For this item, female respondents agreed significantly more strongly ( $M = 4.25$ ) than their male counterparts ( $M = 3.90$ ).

## Discussion

The findings would seem to indicate that those public school faculty members interviewed agree or strongly agree with a number of the orientation goals identified in the survey. However, the researchers were unable to determine if there were differences in regard to other characteristics associated with the sample. For example, there was not enough variance in race or gender to run an ANOVA against those characteristics. Therefore, we are only able to make broad generalizations for most, if not all, of the items.

It is important to note that those surveyed did identify the majority of these items as being particularly critical to the transition of the students whom they work with in moving into the college level. This may indicate that as public school employees talk with their students about concerns and fears, the items identified in the survey are issues that come up repeatedly. Or, it may indicate that based upon their past experiences, they are identifying items that were difficult to their own experiences.

The specific items that secondary personnel identified as important for those students transitioning to college included assisting in determining the student's purpose in attending college and assisting the student in developing positive relationships with college faculty, staff, and students. First, it would make sense that secondary school faculty should have a strong role in helping students understand the purpose of attending college and in many instances might well play a role in a student's choice of institutions. Orientation programs might benefit from exploring how secondary school teachers and administrators influence the process so that their programming is both congruent and adds to what has already been emphasized in the college choice and decision process. Second, the next three items (Table 2) are all based upon developing relationships. There is some slight variance in who those relationships should be developed with in regard to priority but they all fall under the general description of positive relationships. Again, this is a life skill that could be developed in public schools and carried on through the college experience.

Public school faculty also rated the awareness of nonclassroom opportunities as being important for a successful transition from high school to college. This high rating

supports the findings of Twale (1989) in regard to the preponderance of out-of-classroom learning objectives that deal with issues such as accepting and celebrating diversity, social structure development, and interpersonal skill development. In addition, the high rating finding coincides with the concept of college campuses offering outdoor, recreation-focused orientation programs that build community.

The implications of this study are varied and should be directed to two audiences. First, college orientation staff may want to consider the views of those people who most recently spent time with the students entering their varied institutions. Having spent as much as 4 years with some students, secondary school faculty members are in tune with the concerns that high school students have most recently expressed. Second, secondary school faculty should assist high school seniors in their transition to college, and college orientation staff can perhaps learn to coach (and learn from) secondary school teachers and administrators about psychological and emotional issues surrounding the transition to college. There are a number of skills identified by this survey which secondary school faculty could address before the students ever leave public school. These skills are helpful to any student leaving for post-secondary education and therefore are not necessarily specific to any one institution.

And lastly, the study findings provide an important component in the continued dialogue about the CAS Standards for New Student Orientation. The CAS Standards emerged from a discussion by senior student affairs administrators 20 years ago, and the notion of a secondary and higher education disconnect, along with low retention and graduation rates, suggest that perhaps it is time to renew the discussion about standards and include those who prepare students for college, and perhaps even those who utilize the results of higher education.

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TABLE 1

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**Description of Survey Respondents**  
 N=219
 

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Professional Title	n	%
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Professional Title		
Department chair	35	21
Assistant/Assoc/Vice Principal	7	4
Principal	7	4
Assistant/Assoc Superintendent	5	3
Superintendent	0	0
Counselor (and other)	165	67
Total	219	99%
Gender		
Female	112	51
Male	53	24
No response	54	24
Total	219	99%

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TABLE 2

Overall Mean Ratings of Orientation Goals as Needs for Orientation Programs  
N=219

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Assist the student in identifying costs of attending the college, both in terms of dollars and personal commitment	4.50	.838
Explain the process for class scheduling and registration	4.47	.838
Provide information concerning academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs	4.47	.839
Create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning	4.46	.837
Provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enables the student to make reasoned and well-informed decisions	4.45	.829
Assist the student in understanding the college's expectations	4.43	.813
Provide appropriate information on personal safety and security	4.38	.815
Provide referrals to qualified advisers and counselors	4.33	.815
Provide information and exposure to available institutional resources	4.35	.780
Assist the student in developing familiarity with the physical surrounding	4.30	.737
Assist in determining the student's purpose(s) in attending the college	4.30	.920
Assist the student in developing positive relationships with college faculty	4.17	.883

TABLE 2 (CONT.)

**Overall Mean Ratings of Orientation Goals as Needs for Orientation Programs**  
N=219

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Assist the student in developing positive relationships with college staff	4.14	.878
Assist the student in developing positive relations with other new students	4.13	.980
Promote an awareness of nonclassroom opportunities	4.04	.850
Provide opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students	4.05	.871
Assist the student in understanding the purpose(s) of the college/university (i.e., academic, career, etc.)	3.97	.962
Provide information about opportunities for self-assessment	3.94	.919
Assist students in developing positive relationships with individuals from his/her community	3.72	1.02
Assist in understanding the mission of the college (i.e., identity, liberal arts, etc.)	3.57	.994

TABLE 3

Mean Ratings of Orientation Goals by Gender  
N=219

	Female	SD	Male	SD*
Assist the student in identifying costs of attending the college, both in terms of dollars and personal commitment	4.52	.869	4.45	.773
Explain the process for class scheduling and registration	4.52	.804	4.37	.903
Provide information concerning academic policies, procedures, requirements, and programs	4.45	.892	4.50	.723
Create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning	4.54	.769	4.30	.952
Provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enables the student to make reasoned and well-informed decisions	4.44	.888	4.47	.696
Assist the student in understanding the college's expectations	4.43	.802	4.43	.843
Provide appropriate information on personal safety and security	4.43	.768	4.28	.906
Provide referrals to qualified advisers and counselors	4.32	.840	4.37	.765
Provide information and exposure to available institutional resources	4.31	.816	4.45	.695
Assist the student in developing familiarity with the physical surrounding	4.33	.717	4.24	.782
Assist in determining the student's purpose(s) in attending the college	4.25	.956	4.39	.839
Assist the student in developing positive relationships with college faculty	4.19	.847	4.13	.961

TABLE 3 (CONT.)

**Mean Ratings of Orientation Goals by Gender**  
N=219

	Female	SD	Male	SD*
Assist the student in developing positive relationships with college staff	4.16	.844	4.11	.953
Assist the student in developing positive relations with other new students	4.25	.821	3.90	1.22*
Promote an awareness of nonclassroom opportunities	4.07	.877	3.98	.796
Provide opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students	4.09	.793	3.96	1.01
Assist students in understanding the purpose(s) of the college/university (i.e., academic, career, etc.)	3.96	.976	4.0	.940
Provide information about opportunities for self-assessment	3.91	.839	4.0	1.07
Assist the student in developing positive relationships with individuals from his/her community	3.75	.932	3.66	1.19
Assist in understanding the mission of the college (i.e., identity, liberal arts, etc.)	3.51	.977	3.69	1.03

\* *Significantly different at the .05 level.*