

Facing the Facebook Generation: Ethical Challenges in Orientation

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Orientation professionals often are masters at the “nuts and bolts” aspects of organizing and implementing programs that serve new students and families in their transition to a college or university environment. Often included among their competencies are selecting, training, and supervising staff members; developing publications; managing budgets; and evaluating programs.

An area that is easy to overlook in program planning and delivery, however, is that of ethical considerations in orientation. This brief article discusses three current areas in which ethics intersect with the work of an orientation professional.

Electronic File Sharing

Case Study

As the orientation coordinator at a community college, you have several creative student leaders on this year’s orientation staff. They voluntarily take on the task of developing the curriculum for the small group meetings with new students during orientation. The curriculum is based on several popular songs and seems like it will “connect” with new students.

Before the first orientation session, one of the student leaders decides that the groups will be even more effective if the leaders have the actual songs to use. He downloads them from a file sharing service and burns them on CDs for each of the groups. You observe him handing the CDs out to the group leaders and ask him what he’s giving them. Thinking it is no big deal, he tells you what is on the CDs. As his supervisor, how do you handle this situation?

The Issue

This student leader’s actions reflect a larger issue which is currently the subject of many lawsuits and broader threats of legal actions. Students’ use of the Internet to copy and “share” music has been a growing problem for many colleges and universities. Having access to wide bandwidths, powerful computers, and available time has allowed many college students to choose to access file sharing services in order to download

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music. As the problem has escalated, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) has become increasingly aggressive in pursuing violations of copyright on recorded music.

While Napster has changed to a legal, subscription-based service, there are many other illegal alternatives still available to students. The RIAA has employed a variety of efforts, including the use of legal procedures and lawsuits, to stop the flow of illegal file sharing. This includes efforts to force colleges and universities to turn over lists of names of students who are significant users of a campus computer system for these types of activities (Viega, 2004). In this environment, a challenge facing many campuses is liability for the actions of their students.

Colleges and universities are considering how to slow or stop this illegal activity, leading some orientation professionals to ask whether this issue should be addressed during new student orientation. Some institutions have decided that they will incorporate this material into their expectations of all new students when they enter college. A prominent example is the University of California at Berkeley, which has implemented a mandatory session for all students who will be living in residence halls and accessing the campus network (Pascual, 2003; Sanders, 2003).

Is this problem so extensive that it warrants including an orientation session on file sharing for all new students? Consider the fact that one industry group monitors almost 200,000 illegal file downloads a week, many of them from college campuses (McGuire, 2004). Although many students would like to pretend that illegal downloads are not important, this activity is a reflection of a shift in personal ethical standards. In many ways, file sharing reflects the impact of situation ethics (the morality of an action is determined based upon the time and place) and cultural relativism (the morality of an action is determined by cultural values instead of broader universal principles). Although it may be an uncomfortable conversation to have, these issues provide “teachable moments” for new students and student staff members.

These circumstances represent an ethical dilemma. One issue frequently raised by defenders of this student behavior is that of academic freedom. Those involved in file sharing contend that they should have the freedom to experiment and explore within the academic setting. This view reflects a strong sense that downloading files can contribute to the learning process if channeled in the right direction. Faculty and students both expect an environment which embodies freedom of thought and expression. However, there must be clear standards and expectations of the campus community. File sharing or downloading files constitutes stealing even though many consider it a legitimate activity or a minor infraction. In the academy, illegally obtaining files may also be a violation of academic integrity policies.

A proactive step at the beginning of the student’s experience on campus would be to clarify the university’s expectations for students, including those around the ethics of file sharing. A measured response that challenges students, leads them to think critically, and encourages them to develop decision-making abilities about ethical questions is needed from the start of the first year. Institutions also can use this opportunity to inform students of the consequences of illegal file sharing. At a few universities, such as The

George Washington University, a different route has been taken, with the institution purchasing a subscription for each of their students from the new, legal version of Napster (Sanders, 2003).

Relationships Between Staff and New Students

Case Study

Elliott is one of the most outgoing and effective group leaders of your orientation program at a small, private university. At one of your orientation sessions, he meets Dominique who will be a new freshman when the semester begins. After the orientation session, the administrative coordinator comes into your office to discuss a situation that occurred recently. She relates that Elliott came into the office yesterday afternoon, sat down at the computer, and looked up Dominique's student record. He wrote down her phone number from the orientation database, and then changed her orientation group assignment so that she would be a part of his group. During Welcome Week you see the two of them together frequently on campus, and you hear from several of the girls on her hall that he is exerting pressure on her to go out with him. What is your response? Do you have an ethical responsibility to intervene?

The Issue

The fundamental issue in this situation is that a staff member seems to be taking advantage of the power differential between an orientation leader and a new student. Although supervisors want to select student leaders who take a personal interest in new students and make them feel welcomed, there are clearly boundaries that must be observed when an orientation leader interacts with a new student.

When the leader of a group of new students pays excessive attention to one member, the situation affects not only one new student, but the whole group as well. This creates an ethical dilemma for the orientation supervisor. The orientation leader is clearly in a position of unequal power in this relationship and can wield some power and influence over a new student at a vulnerable point in their transition to a college or university.

During leader training, supervisors must prepare student leaders effectively for potential conflicts of interest by presenting clear, consistent written guidelines regarding the expectations that the university has for their behavior and actions during orientation. At some institutions, these guidelines take the form of a contract or agreement that is signed by supervisors and orientation leaders. It is important that these standards be consistently applied to all members of their orientation staff and that everyone understands the ethical implications of the decisions and actions.

Social Networking Web sites

Case Study

Lately, you have been hearing a lot about facebook.com. You decide to sign up for an account and begin exploring. It seems like a great tool to stay in touch with old friends and learn more about current students. You notice that students post pictures, facts about themselves, classes they are taking, and their areas of interest. As the director of Orientation at a large, public university, you decide to look at the profiles of your current orientation leader staff to learn more about them. The first person you look up is Sarah. As you look at Sarah's profile you notice that the pictures are of her holding a beer, taking a shot, and even doing a keg stand. Her message board is filled with posts about the weekend before and her drunken behavior. You know Sarah is only 19 and the pictures seemed to be taken in a residence hall room. What is your response?

The Issue

The fundamental issue in this situation is the assumption that Sarah is not of legal drinking age and appears to be consuming alcohol in the residence halls. However, this information was found on a Web site where Sarah has the right to post any information about herself she wants to share. This is where the dilemma lies. Do colleges and universities have the right to take action against students for posting information on a Web site? Do potential supervisors have a right or responsibility to use Facebook and similar Web sites in the screening process for orientation leaders? Where does the First Amendment—freedom of speech—fall into this argument?

Colleges and universities need to begin dialogue on issues surrounding Facebook and other similar Web sites on which students frequently post personal information. The issues go beyond underage drinking. Students use Web sites to post pictures glorifying drug use and other inappropriate behaviors. In addition, students may use the Internet to threaten or harass other students and administrators. Policies and procedures on appropriate behavior need to be developed by colleges and universities. It is the job of student affairs professionals to work with students to help them understand why certain information should not be posted on the Internet for everyone to see.

It is especially important for orientation leaders and other students who represent colleges and universities to understand possible ramifications of using Facebook and similar Web sites. Orientation leaders are seen as role models for both new students and their family members. Often after orientation, new students will seek out their orientation leaders on Facebook to find out more information about them. Having new students see their orientation leader doing a keg stand sends a strong message. Is this the message colleges and universities wish to send to their new students?

Conclusion

As illustrated in the preceding case studies, orientation professionals must keep current with evolving issues as they relate to college and university students. These are just several examples of ethical challenges that may occur for orientation professionals. Unquestionably, orientation programs are key components in introducing new students to college expectations and responsibilities. They present a powerful opportunity to build strong foundations for new students. However, a number of ethical challenges can be encountered in this process, and these challenges must be addressed proactively to provide clear and consistent messages to staff and new students. One responsibility of an orientation professional is to ensure that the institution is prepared to handle ethical concerns as they arise. Possible strategies include:

- Developing specific written expectations and policies for student orientation staff;
- Including speakers or panels in orientation programming to address ethical challenges;
- Providing training for discussion group leaders to confidently and effectively deal with this topic during their sessions with new students and family members. Training might also include role playing and discussion of potential ethical dilemmas;
- Ensuring that you set a good and consistent example for others on your staff;
- Requiring seminars in ethics for all new students at the institution;
- Requiring that all new students sign a statement accepting the university's ethical policies or code of conduct (such as the "Carolinian Creed" of the University of South Carolina); and
- Including ethics as an area for discussion in the curriculum for first-year seminar courses.

Beckner (2004) observed that:

When a decision or choice is required, the ethical behavior will be that which develops trust, confidence, and integrity in relationships. Ethical behavior will facilitate cooperation and enhance self-respect, avoiding the barriers created by distrust, suspicion, and misunderstanding. Communication will improve and better working relationships will develop, resulting in increased productivity and work satisfaction. (2004)

It is a responsibility of orientation professionals and their colleagues to determine how their programs will address ethical issues and decision making proactively. Thinking about these decisions in advance can help provide more thoughtful and congruent responses on the part of the institution and its staff.

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