

Orientation and NASCAR: Parallel Worlds

Brenda McKenzie

I am a NASCAR fan—and I'm not afraid to admit it! One recent Sunday afternoon as I was watching a race, it suddenly struck me how similar racing and race teams are to our orientation programs and our roles. I can almost hear people saying, "That's crazy!", but let me share a few examples of these two parallel worlds.

Teamwork

It would be impossible for a driver to win a race without the team behind him or her. Although the driver (or in our case, the director) may be the one on the track, pushing to the front to try and win the race, that wouldn't be possible without his/her team in the pits. Every pit stop requires the crew to work together to service the car and driver and get him or her out on the track before anyone else. Think about orientation. Although there may be a director who serves as the driving force behind the program, without the rest of the staff (student, support, and professional) as well as involvement from others at the institution, it would not be possible to welcome new students to campus.

Endurance

NASCAR drivers *are* true athletes (I've heard the argument a number of times that they aren't). Consider this. They race in 36 races each season. Many of these happen during the summer on tracks in the South where air temperatures can easily reach the 80s and 90s. That means track temperatures are at least 10-15 degrees higher, and inside the cars, it's at least 15-20 degrees hotter. Add to that having to drive in tense situations for 400–500 miles, not wrecking, strategizing as you drive, and finding someone to draft with so you can get to the front.

Our orientation programs are not much different. Many of our programs occur during the summer and last anywhere from one day to four days, beginning early in the morning and ending late at night. How many of us only get a few hours of sleep during our programs before we start all over the next day? Fall welcome programs are the same way. During our programs we have to be prepared for anything, make sure the program runs smoothly (and that we don't "wreck"), and work with others to get new students housed, fed, advised and registered, all while maintaining a positive attitude and energy.

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Speed

Race car drivers don't go 55 miles per hour. They work at speeds anywhere from 150 to 200 mph. Pit crews battle to get their driver in and out of their pit stop in 15 seconds or less (and that includes changing four tires and fueling the car). While we may not "drive" that fast, think about how quickly our programs go. It seems like a day is just starting and all of a sudden it's over. Staff may have only a short time to get from one place to another or may have only a few minutes between presentations before another group of students joins them. Advisers hardly may have time to get a quick drink of water before their next appointment comes in. There is not a lot of "down time" during our programs; everything must run like clockwork.

There are a number of key positions that make it possible to be a winning team

NASCAR teams aren't just a driver and crew chief. They involve spotters (who are the eyes of the driver on the track – telling them where other cars are in relation to them), pit crews, team members back at the shop who put the cars in top racing form, and engine shops that build quality engines. Orientation doesn't just happen with one or two people, either. We need our student staff to make (and maintain) connections with our new students, do presentations, and assist with the behind-the-scenes details that make our programs happen. We need academic advisers to meet with students and help them build class schedules for their first semester. If the program is overnight, residence hall staff are involved and our campus dining services staff help provide meals. And then there are all the other individuals on campuses who present programs, provide services, or just answer questions during the program. This definitely illustrates there is no "I" in team.

Communication

Without good communication on race day, a driver is almost "driving blind." The spotter has to be able to clearly tell them what's happening around them. The crew chief has to be able to solve problems and keep the driver motivated. The pit crew has to be able to work through a pit stop without much verbal communication at all, but still knows what needs to be done. If we don't communicate clearly to our new students, they will not be as prepared as they could be to do well in their first semester/year at college. We also need to clearly communicate expectations, roles, and responsibilities to our student leaders so that they are then able to do their job without constant supervision. And we definitely play a role in keeping our staff motivated throughout what can be a long, tiring (yet stimulating) experience.

Focus on the fans

One of the things I really enjoy about NASCAR, and car racing in general, is the fact that these athletes appreciate their fans and take time to interact with them. You will

often hear drivers, after a race, talk about whether that particular race was exciting for the fans. Drivers make a lot of appearances, both during the season and off-season. This definitely relates to what we do—focus on our new students. They are the primary audience for what we do, for why we work so hard at planning throughout the year. New students see us many times during the program—presenting sessions, leading group discussions, or just answering questions one on one. But it often doesn't end when the program does. Later, student leaders are stopped on campus by students who were in their groups or who recognize them from a presentation they made. Also, more and more campuses are implementing first-year mentoring and other programs to keep that connection and focus going strong.

Impact

The NASCAR fan base has grown exponentially in the past ten years. And NASCAR fans are loyal—to their drivers/teams and to the sport. The same can be said of what we do with orientation and transition programs. A quality orientation experience can significantly impact a new student's level of satisfaction with, and loyalty to, the institution. This, in turn, can have a positive impact on retention.

I hope by now that you can see the similarities between NASCAR and orientation. Or put it in a sports context that you enjoy. I think you'll be surprised at the number of connections you can find. And who knows? Thinking in these terms might help you develop new ways of approaching situations and challenges with your programs.

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