

Examining the Inclusivity of Parent and Family College Orientations: A Directed Content Analysis

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This study examined the inclusivity language and general characteristics (e.g., cost, duration, types of sessions offered) of 82 orientation programs across 35 states in the U.S. A directed content analysis of orientation websites revealed logistical considerations of attending orientation, such as cost and duration of orientation; variation in inclusive language regarding the use of parent, family, and friend terminology; and potential strategies for increased inclusivity and partnerships between parent and family orientation programs.

Analysis

Campus efforts to address the needs of parents and families of today's college students have flourished, particularly through parent programs and orientations (Savage, 2008; Ward-Roof, Heaton, & Coburn, 2008). The role of parents is gaining attention as an area for research, particularly regarding diverse families' involvement in the college experience (Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012; Kiyama & Harper, 2015). Communication with parents is critical (Daniel et al., 2009) because better-informed parents can provide more support for their children, which improves students' adjustment (Carney-Hall, 2008; Kolkhorst, Yazedjian, & Toews, 2010). Carney-Hall (2008) recommends institutions foster positive relationships with parents through their programming. Institutions are encouraged to invite families to orientation and other events that inform families about student support services offered by campuses to improve the college transition experience (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2012). Scholars have argued for more transparency regarding college costs, scholarships, and funding, particularly among students who are the first in their families to attend college, low-income students, and families of color (Burdman, 2005). One venue for sharing this information is through orientation programs. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which a sample of orientation programs was inclusive of diverse families through an analysis of the

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language used referring to parents and families. In addition, this study also sought to establish the inclusivity of specific characteristics of the orientation programs (e.g., cost, duration, types of sessions offered).

Literature Review

Orientation programs provide higher education institutions a formative opportunity to develop positive relationships with parents and family members (Carney-Hall, 2008), with the overall intent of supporting students (Ward-Roof et al., 2008). These programs can open the lines of communication with parents and families and clarify the availability of campus resources and contacts (Cutright, 2008). Some have argued that institutions need to create programs for parents and students that serve a more diverse set of parents (Coburn & Woodward, 2001; Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Lombardi et al., 2012). For example, more orientation programs now acknowledge the involvement of additional family members, such as grandparents, siblings, and other key supporters (Mayer, 2011). The composition of families should also be inclusive of single parents, blended, and extended families (Donovan, 2003). This inclusion of parents and additional family members can help facilitate students' transition to college (Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2012; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Donovan (2003) highlights the need to provide additional communication for families with students who are the first in their families to attend college (e.g., avoid using jargon) during orientation programs. Offering programming in multiple languages can be helpful in reaching non-native English speakers (Kiyama & Harper, 2015). Sensitive to the needs of first-generation students, others suggest that communication or special orientation sessions with students and parents should be tailored to their needs and offered in accessible locations (Coburn & Woodward, 2001; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

Among parent and family programming staff, parent orientation programs are consistently cited as a pride point among the services and programs offered (Savage & Petree, 2013). Previously identified, helpful orientation topics include: the college transition experience, campus resources and services, success strategies and expectations, and institutional integration (Budny & Paul, 2003). While the vast majority of institutions offer some type of parent and family member orientation experience, very little research or assessment has been done with these programs to establish their unique features (Savage & Petree, 2011). The literature also fails to capture a descriptive understanding, much less an analysis of inclusivity, of orientation programs and their basic characteristics, including cost, duration, programmatic content, and language used to describe parents and families.

These topical areas are important to investigate because they provide an indication of how open and accessible orientations are to families, as well as evidence of potential barriers to participation. Parents and families have been positively associated with student outcomes (Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009) and may help ease the transition to college, particularly for underrepresented students (Dennis et al., 2005; Lombardi et al., 2012). Specially,

support and involvement from parents has been associated with lower levels of adjustment stress among students transitioning to college (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Many researchers have found evidence of the beneficial role that family involvement offers students during that first-year transition to college (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Mattanah, Lopez, & Govern, 2011).

Orientation programs offer institutions an opportunity to open communication channels with the families of entering college students (Cutright, 2008). Expanding attention beyond just parents to other family members widens the focus and better represents the support offered to today's college students (Mayer, 2011). Thus, the inclusion of parents and families in orientation programs provides support, resources, and a sense of appreciation and acknowledgement of their role (Budny & Paul, 2003). Our research question for this study is: To what extent does a sample of orientation programs offer inclusive language and practices (in the form of their cost, duration, and session offerings) to diverse parents and families?

Methods

In order to investigate the offerings of college orientation programs, we started with the membership list of two parent associations relevant to higher education and student affairs: NODA—Association for Orientation Transition and Retention in Higher Education, and AHEPPP—Association of Higher Education Parent/Family Program Professionals. Our rationale was that these associations would be more likely to have institutional members that offered parent and family programs. We randomly selected a subset of institutions from each association's membership list, and purposefully sampled to ensure the geographic diversity of our sample. We also ensured that both public and private institutions were included. The criteria in purposeful sampling strategies included: type of institution (public, private) and geographic location within different regions of the United States. In addition to this list, we also included a sample of institutions that were not members of either association. For all institutions, we retrieved information about the programs through an online search. This strategy was informed by our assumption that parents or family members might be looking for and retrieving this information online as well, and this might be the primary means of communicating program details with families. We also contend that websites can convey cultural messages and values (Zhao, Massey, Murphy, & Fang, 2003), and past research has established the importance of transmitting the sociocultural values of families and communities of color as a means of establishing positive college ideologies (Kiyama, 2010).

Sample

Data were gathered from 82 institutions located in 35 states. All 82 institutions

were four-year institutions, 24 were private and 58 were public. The institutions sampled included baccalaureate (4), master's (26), and research universities (52). Our sample included a balance of institutions that were members of NODA (14, which is approximately 21% of the regional leadership member institutions of NODA), AHEPPP (34, which is one-third of the AHEPPP institutional membership), and both associations (9), as well as 25 institutions that were not members of either association. We reached a data saturation point and felt that the sample of institutions offered a variety of institutional types from different regions. We make no claims about the representativeness of the institutions of either association (NODA or AHEPPP), as we have no way of making this assertion.

Development of Categories and Coding Procedures

Consistent with our desire to capture key concepts guided by existing literature and theory, we utilized a directed content analysis, a strategy involving a structured approach to the data utilizing pre-determined codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis can be a useful tool for examining the meaning of patterns and trends contained within documents, in this case online materials (Stemler, 2001). Pre-determined codes were informed by existing research: use of language and terminology, program duration, program cost, and program content. We paid particular attention to any programming specifically targeted at first-generation, low-income, or families of color. The research team, comprised of four members who have both qualitative research experience and have published in the area of family and parent programs and experiences, established the coding process and thorough cross-checked analysis to ensure consistency in one another's coding. We think the information conveyed online provides key basic-level information about the programs and their primary areas of focus. This descriptive analysis of parent and family orientation programs provides a preliminary understanding of the range of programs currently available across a sample of U.S. institutions. This analysis also provides an understanding of the programmatic offerings available to parents and families within this sample of orientation programs.

Limitations

A limitation of this approach is that the information provided online might not be accurate, current, or fully reflective of all that the programs have to offer. Similarly, some parent and family programs might not be advertised online but might exist and be shared with parents through email, letters, or other forms of communication to which the research team was not privy. We also acknowledge that not all parents or family members will access this information online, but we do think this analysis is worthwhile and that the language and content presented online provides some indication of the values and assumptions of orientation staff members. We think that these views might extend into and help shape orientation as well.

Findings

The results of our directed content analysis reveal key themes regarding the characteristics of orientation programs, including their cost, duration, program description, and session content. These results will be discussed first, followed by the analysis of the language used to refer to parents and families.

Cost

As finances are already a deterrent to higher education access, the cost of the program is an important factor to consider, because this might create participation barriers for parents and families. Our findings revealed that assessing the cost of orientation mirrors the complexity in trying to assess the overall cost of attending college (Perna, 2006). There was a wide range of fees described, where some programs specifically named and priced all anticipated costs (e.g., meals, housing, parking, materials), whereas other programs did not mention costs but also did not clarify that attendance was free. Other programs described fees but without specifying whether each of the anticipated costs were covered. Some programs mentioned a per person fee (not differentiating between students and other guests), some differentiated fees specific to students differently than parent fees, some programs charged by the family, and other programs offered a tiered system where the first person or parent was charged a particular fee and additional guests could be added at a discounted rate. It is important to note that even beyond the orientation fee and anticipated costs, there are other potential costs associated with attending orientation that might not be explicitly stated or discussed, including transportation costs, hotels, daycare or alternative arrangements for family members staying home, and lost wages if work is missed.

One difficulty in capturing the cost of orientation is that some programs in our sample (12%) characterized the cost as being free when, in fact, the fee is rolled into the overall cost of attending that institution and no specific cost is mentioned, or students are indeed charged a specific fee that is noted but is rolled into their tuition and fees. Nearly all of the programs in our sample did not charge the student but did charge for parents, persons, and/or guests, making the cost of orientation somewhat difficult to characterize for our classification purposes. We decided to classify cost according to what the student was charged, with the assumption that this would be the minimum possible charge. By this, we mean that at minimum institutions would charge the student then family and other guests for attending orientation. Since no previous studies of this kind exist, we have no basis of comparison to what has been done in other studies. Of the six programs that specified a charge to students, the cost ranged from \$28 to \$320, with the average totaling \$137.

Only six programs included the cost of meals in the orientation fees. Similarly, six programs specified additional costs for housing, where the average charge to stay in campus housing was \$35 per night. One program described offering care for younger siblings with a charge of \$18 for childcare, although the duration

and other details related to the length of this option was not clarified. In contrast, another program specifically noted that additional guests beyond the student could attend but needed to be at least 17 years of age. Approximately one-fifth of the programs (22%) charged up to \$50 to participate in orientation (66% of which charged \$10-\$39; 34% charged \$40-\$50) and 29% charged more than \$50. The highest orientation fee within the sample was a public institution charging \$320 per student participant and \$150 per parent or guest, although the information regarding what that cost included was not offered. Among the programs charging per guest, the cost for the first guest ranged between \$15 and \$150, with the average totaling \$56. Slightly over one-third of the sample (37%) did not clearly specify whether there was an orientation fee.

Duration

Nearly two-thirds of the orientation programs sampled had programs lasting between one (e.g., 8am-5pm) and two days. A smaller proportion of programs held shorter programs lasting less than one day (11%) and an equal proportion lasted two to three days (9%), or more than three days (1%). Interestingly, 13% of the programs were unclear about the starting and ending times of their orientation program.

Content

In order to assess the types of sessions offered within the orientation programs and their content and focus, we reviewed any session descriptions that were included and developed a list of themes of the offerings. The most common program content themes were campus resources (50%) and academics (43%). Financial aid was specifically noted by one-third of the programs (33%). About one-fourth of programs devoted time to strategies for support (23%), around one-fifth covered housing or residence life (22%) and campus safety (18%), and one-sixth covered student involvement opportunities (14%). Only 9% of programs mentioned campus policies as a theme.

In addition to these primary content themes, there were some additional themes that were mentioned less frequently and could have been part of the broader thematic categories mentioned above. Since they were mentioned specifically, we wanted to make note of these additional content areas. Programs emphasized communication or relationship-building through workshops and meetings, or through sessions about the relationships between or among parents and the institution (broadly defined or with specific administrators/offices, advisors, or faculty) and relationships between families attending orientation. Sessions focused on preparing families for key issues or needs that students might encounter or have questions about while in college, such as campus safety, alcohol and drug abuse, technology, textbooks, employment and career planning, parking and transportation, and other common student challenges. The remaining sessions were targeted toward specific experiences available to students (e.g., study abroad,

prayer groups, Greek Life).

Language

We were interested in capturing whether and how any references to parent(s), family, families (including specific individuals: mom, dad, sibling, grandparents, etc.), and friend were used. Within the titles of the orientation program names, 44% included parents in their title, 27% did not refer to parents or families at all, and 23% used the term families. Four programs in the sample mentioned friend in their orientation program name (5%), and one program did not specify a program name (1%). With regard to program description content, the use of parent, families, family, and friend also varied. Family appeared 36 times while families only appeared 12 times in program descriptions. Parents appeared 44 times; parent was used 31 times. The terms friend and friends were seldom used in program descriptions, twice and once, respectively.

Another aspect of our analysis revealed statements of inclusion that were directed specifically toward members of students' families or support networks. Some of these statements were made in reference to orientation as a whole or the philosophy or priorities of the institution, broadly speaking. For example, one institution said, "We'd also like to welcome you into the [institution] community as a valuable part of your student's educational journey." Another institution noted the importance of families: "[Institution] would like to make the college experience family friendly because the family unit will be the greatest support system for students as they navigate through college." Similarly, another institution connected family support with student success: "In our work to ensure success of first time students at [Institution], we make partnering with parents and family members one of our top priorities."

Some programs described an orientation session directed at adjustment, noting "a special program designed to provide key information about the adjustments new college students and parents will face during the next few years." Another institution offered "a complete program designed specially for parents and adult family members to address their needs through this transition." This sentiment was echoed in another institutional statement that emphasized the transition to college is felt beyond just the student: "We realize that a student's transition to [Institution] is shared by the whole family. We feel that orientation can benefit parents and guardians, as well as the students. Orientation is more than just another campus tour." While these statements were not geared specifically toward first-generation participants, they offer insight into how institutions might convey the extent to which students' families and supporters are valued, that their participation is important, and that students are not the only ones who are experiencing a transition.

Discussion

Within higher education, students' parents and families are representative of more diverse family configurations (Redding, Murphy, & Sheley, 2011) with multiple forms of involvement and engagement. Inclusive programming for college students' families creates an environment for a range of opportunities to further strengthen familial relationships that are known to contribute to enhanced college transition and success for students (Carney-Hall, 2008; Kiyama & Harper, 2015). It has become important, then, for institutions to establish family-friendly environments throughout campus. One component of this includes orientation and transition programming. The present study builds on existing orientation programming research by examining 82 orientation programs across the United States to determine the characteristics of the programs (e.g., cost, duration, types of sessions offered) and to see whether messages of inclusivity regarding supporters (parents, families, friends, significant others, etc.) were shared. These results reveal potential barriers to participation and highlight innovative practices that orientation programs can offer with respect to communication and fostering positive relationships with parents and families.

Implications for Practice

Logistical Considerations

The cost of attending orientation varied widely for students and families. Given that costly program fees may prohibit or discourage families, especially those with limited financial resources, from participating in orientation activities, we encourage institutions to explore billing options such as adding these fees to students' tuition and fee statements. Doing so may allow some students to utilize their financial aid packages, particularly grants and scholarships, to help cover the cost of attending orientation for themselves and their families. There are additional considerations related to the complicated financial aid application process and the need for further clarity about the process, particularly among low-income youth and their families (Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Alternatively, finding other ways of covering this cost, such as through fundraising by campus parent groups or other sponsorship opportunities, might be another possible strategy.

Similarly, the length of programs can also pose a barrier for families. Although most programs in our content analysis did not charge extra for extended programming, there may be additional costs like time away from work, travel and lodging expenses, and childcare for siblings. One obvious suggestion is partnering with local hotels and residence halls to lower costs, which many programs do. A problem with a less clear solution is finding ways to ensure childcare is available, and is affordable or free, during orientation. Alternatively, we encourage institutions to explore other means of sharing orientation information, including: live and recorded streaming of sessions, smart phone apps to share

important transition information and tips, and interactive online workshops. Another possibility could be orientation workshops offered in local communities. Given the potential limitations in staffing and funding already facing orientation programming, this strategy might be successful by partnering with parent and alumni groups who might be able to assist with coordination.

Inclusivity Strategies

Given our focus on language and terminology, it is important to address the implications for designing more inclusive materials for diverse families as they navigate orientation websites. First, although only two programs noted friends and only 23% used the term families, these programs serve as important examples of capturing the expansive network of support available to students. We encourage practitioners to consider language beyond parent(s) and suggest terms like families, support members, and guests, recognizing that some families will also be attending with grandparents, siblings, and extended family members.

Second, we did not find examples of specific programming focused on first-generation, low-income, and families of color. Thus, we encourage practitioners to think broadly about how these families can be engaged in culturally-relevant ways beyond programmatic efforts by multicultural affairs offices. Likewise, creating inclusive and family-friendly spaces requires that departments across institutions also utilize inclusive language, offering many opportunities for cross-departmental collaborations on college campuses. Although programs may offer these sessions during orientation, explicitly noting the sessions on documents offers more inclusive signals to diverse families. For example, it is important to offer a session for first-generation families but to also explain this terminology and convey, in positive terms, recognition for the assets they bring to their student and the institution. Finally, practitioners should pay special attention to the primary languages spoken by their incoming students and families. When possible, offering documents that are translated into the home language of families will create a more inclusive welcome for families (Kiyama & Harper, 2015).

Strategies for Sharing Across Programs

One implication from this study is to find a way for orientation program staff to share a database of innovative programming and language, as well as logistical details, similar to the one we created for this review of orientation content. An interactive database that allows for edits and updates would offer a resource for orientation practitioners to reference best practices, inclusive programming, and innovative program elements from across the country. Such an effort could be housed and supported by one or both of the orientation or parent associations relevant to higher education and student affairs sampled for this study, NODA and AHEPPP, or perhaps by another student affairs association.

As previously noted, collaboration across departments might maximize

resources and build on existing efforts and skills. Institutions tend to work in silos, but we further wonder if creative partnerships between institutions are possible. For example, partnering with local community partners or colleges may allow for a greater breadth of programming to occur for families regarding the common transition-to-college issues that might emerge regardless of the specific campus a student chooses to attend. This programming can occur within families' own neighborhoods, potentially reducing travel costs and time away from work, and may create a sense of comfort and familiarity within their environment. Local partner institutions might also pool financial resources to offer childcare or parallel college-going programming for younger siblings. Each of these efforts might help incorporate the entire family into the college transition experience.

Implications for Research

This study offers a descriptive analysis of orientation programs across the country. The next step of this research agenda is to determine how parents and families are interpreting this type of information regarding orientation programs, including cost, duration, session content, and language. Future research might determine the true cost of attending orientation and the extent to which some families are dissuaded from participating due to affordability or logistical issues associated with the duration of orientation. Research might also determine the extent to which the advertised content matches the actual orientation sessions that parents and families experience. This would help determine what additional messages are being conveyed at orientation. Additional research that assesses orientation programs occurring off-campus within communities and spaces convenient to parents and families would help offer insights into alternative programming options.

Conclusion

Orientation serves a key function in a student's transition to college. The students' family members, friends, and other supporters are also experiencing some degree of transition as well, and our study reveals that some orientation programs are aware of and able to provide added support to these individuals. There are additional opportunities for programs to add more inclusive language about potential attendees, offer more clarity about the cost of participating in orientation, and increase innovative practices to help share best practices and resources.

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