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Orientation: Meeting the needs of students

Abstract

Orientation is defined as an adjustment or adaptation to a new environment, situation, custom, or set of ideas. It is also defined as introductory instruction concerning a new situation. These definitions aptly apply to college orientation purposes and goals; however, the process of orientation has gone far beyond this in its scope and usage in the modern college setting. The first orientation course on record was at Boston University in 1888 while the first known course offered for credit was established at Reed College in 1911. Orientation programs have grown steadily in depth and scope since that time. The creators of these early programs faced many issues that are still relevant in planning programs. These concerns center around the purposes, goals, and content of the program as well as the social and academic support of the students

ORIENTATION: MEETING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS

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Orientation is defined as an adjustment or adaptation to a new environment, situation, custom, or set of ideas. It is also defined as introductory instruction concerning a new situation. These definitions aptly apply to college orientation purposes and goals; however, the process of orientation has gone far beyond this in its scope and usage in the modern college setting.

The first orientation course on record was at Boston University in 1888 while the first known course offered for credit was established at Reed College in 1911. Orientation programs have grown steadily in depth and scope since that time. The creators of these early programs faced many issues that are still relevant in planning programs. These concerns center around the purposes, goals, and content of the program as well as the social and academic support of the students.

Many scholars have examined orientation programs and the theories behind these programs. In this paper, I will examine the three stages of a comprehensive orientation program for traditional-aged freshmen students which forms a foundation or framework for the transition to college. This paper is based on a review of the literature on orientation programs as well as on interviews with students at a small private college concerning perceptions and ideas about the role and content of the orientation program. The development of an effective orientation program must take into account the needs and desires of the students as well as the benefits to the institution. The development of orientation programs is usually highly individualized, attempting to meet the needs of each institution, but the underlying principles and goals will be of general use and value to student services professionals who develop and deliver student orientation programs.

Overview of the Issue

An effective orientation program can be an important factor in the successful transition to college for traditional-aged freshmen students. The student populations of

universities and colleges have become much more diverse in their attitudes and backgrounds. As a result, the orientation program has changed to meet these needs as well as the need for social and academic satisfaction.

The effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of orientation programs has been evaluated by experts in two areas: social and academic adjustment. Social adjustment is generally measured through course and college satisfaction ratings, student adjustment questionnaires, and increased retention rates. Academic adjustment is determined as being successfully met through increases in student GPAs, persistence to the sophomore year, completion of the enrolled credit hours, and good academic standing for students who participated in the orientation program.

Various studies have suggested the majority of freshmen students share common concerns and feelings as they enter college. The orientation program must be designed to meet these issues while being uniquely specific to each college, conveying the anticipatory socialization, culture, policies, and academic expectations of each institution. As a result, numerous studies have been conducted in which three stages of a comprehensive orientation process are examined. The three stages are pre-orientation, orientation week or day, and post-orientation. Each of these stages has a specific purpose and design to meet students' needs. Pre-orientation is a time for the college to maintain the students' interest in coming to that institution rather than another. The orientation week or day is primarily of a social nature to bond students to each other and to the college. Post-orientation programs are generally where the students are introduced to academic matters, leadership programs, and overall survival skills.

The examination of orientation programs requires more than a review of the three stages of the orientation process. I will begin by defining the overall goals, purposes, and

principles of the orientation program. Second, there are many models which have been developed and adapted by colleges and universities to develop orientation programs which need to be examined. A review of these programs will be presented as part of the three stages of the orientation program. Third, I conducted interviews with students at a small private college to gain insight into their perceptions and recollections of orientation. These interviews will add to an increased understanding of both social and academic focuses of the three stages of orientation as well as student satisfaction with the college. Fourth, I will examine the purposes and goals of orientation as they apply to the involvement theory of Alexander Astin and the psychosocial development theory of Arthur Chickering.

Review of the Literature

George Kuh (1991), E. Daniel Kapraun and Don A. Heard (1994), and Susan Frost (1993) have clearly defined the goals, purposes, and principles of an orientation program. Kuh lists the goals of orientation are to facilitate the bonding of students to the college, encourage students to become more actively involved in learning and the college culture, and increase student satisfaction which lends itself to higher retention rates. Kuh lists five factors which assist students in making a successful adjustment to college: a clear college mission supported by an ethic of caring, an attractive physical setting, the use of cultural artifacts, communication of academic expectations through policy statements, and participation of faculty, staff, and students in activities of the college. Kapraun and Heard identify further three additional purposes of orientation: to create a more permanent bond between the students and institution, to improve retention in the critical first year, and to prepare students to meet the academic challenges of the college. Frost has identified three basic principles for a successful orientation program. First, the program should assist students to see orientation as a beginning to the future not the end of the admissions process. Second, the orientation experience should expose students to issues

and experiences they will encounter during their first year at the college. Third, the orientation program should assist students in accepting responsibility for themselves and their future.

Kapraun and Heard (1994), Darla Twale (1989), and Alan Schwitzer, Thomas McGovern, and Steven Robbins (1991) have defined the three stages of the orientation program stating the purposes, contents, and outcomes of orientation. In addition, there are several well known orientation programs which fit into these stages and provide a practical application of these findings to actual practice.

Pre-orientation

The first stage of the orientation program is a pre-orientation component. This stage is generally held in the summer prior to the beginning of the academic year. The purpose of the pre-orientation stage is to make initial contacts with students and maintain their interest in the college in the months prior to beginning college. This session also introduces students to the campus and begins the process of socialization as well as introduces students and parents to the academic demands of the college.

Orientation week or day

The activities that occur during the freshmen orientation week or day traditionally have been of a social nature with a minimal academic focus. These activities are designed to make students feel welcome on campus with a gradual change in focus to issues of diversity, social skills, and the development of study skills. The freshmen orientation week also has been used as a time to formally introduce new students to the college environment, bond the students as a group, and help students understand the commitment they have made to their education.

Post-orientation

The third and most widely varied stage is the post-orientation stage. This stage is varied in the content, length, and activities. Some colleges use semester- or year-long programs, others use workshops, and still others use no extended programming. The post-orientation stage is designed to teach students academic survival skills, social interaction skills, problem solving, and goal setting skills among other topics. These programs may also address topics such as coping skills, class options, and leadership skills in more depth than is possible in the week-long orientation. The overall goals of the extended program are to create a more permanent bond between students and the institution, promote early academic and social adjustment to college, and increase retention rates. The majority of extended or post-orientation programs attempt to provide activities and instruction which will support strong academic survival skills and more subtle socialization activities.

There are a number of programs which have been used as prototypes. One of the best known and most widely copied programs is the University 101 program at the University of South Carolina-Columbia. The goals of this program as well as many other semester- or year-length programs are to develop a sense of group cohesiveness among the students, provide group support, identify campus resources, use the available resources to assist students in gaining a better understanding of higher education, assist students to define their role in the education process, and develop leadership skills. This program places an emphasis on balancing the social and academic preparation of freshmen students.

Another course that is perhaps more comprehensive is the Freshmen Seminar course at Indiana University of Pennsylvania which covers a broad range of skills as well as social interaction activities. The goal of this program is to increase students' GPAs and

retention rates through academic and social interaction and satisfaction. This course includes the areas of learning skills; college, personal, and social adjustment; and career exploration. The learning skills portion is further broken down into study skills, the history of higher education, academic policies, interpersonal skills, and job search information and techniques.

A third program which supports students' social transition to college and ultimately leads to academic success is the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's (UNCC) Freshmen Seminar. This program follows and enhances the involvement theory of Alexander Astin in the activities and goals of the program. This three credit hour elective course addresses the use of campus resources and focuses on social interaction of students through assigned readings, library projects, oral exercises, and participation in campus activities. The overall goal of this program is to provide social satisfaction which leads to academic satisfaction and success.

The review of the related literature and various programs has defined the role and characteristics of the three stages of the orientation program. Although this research has been carried out concerning these programs, further study is warranted. Therefore, it seems desirable to examine significant impacts a week-long orientation program may have on freshmen students' academic preparation, development of skills needed to be successful, and social adjustment to college.

The Interview Procedure

In order to gain insight into an orientation program, I conducted interviews with forty-three students who attended a week-long orientation program followed by workshops rather than a semester-length program. The students were asked questions about their orientation experiences and ways in which the orientation program could be improved to meet social and academic needs of the students. This program included students in the planning of the activities. The incoming students were sent invitations for

the pre-orientation program and asked for more suggestions or concerns they had for the pre-orientation day activities. These suggestions were used as a guide in the planning and content of the college activities. The students also participated in an evaluation of the orientation week and were asked to give suggestions for programming in the post-orientation workshops conducted by the college. The college gave students ownership of the program, provided social and academic interaction, and increased student involvement in the orientation program. I asked the students several questions concerning their expectations of orientation, valuable experiences received from orientation, positive and negative aspects, knowledge they received, changes they experienced in their outlook on college, and lastly, any suggestions they had for improving the orientation program.

The Results

Many of the students responded to the interview questions in a similar fashion by voicing much of the same enthusiasm for the social interaction that occurred during the orientation week activities. However, the students also voiced some interesting observations concerning the preparation they received for future academic challenges, activities that were not well received, and changes that should be made to the orientation program. The names used in this paper are pseudonyms for the students and the college. In addition, I have adhered to the natural language of the students as closely as possible to allow their personal voices to be heard. The following discussions by two students accurately depict the responses I received in the interviews.

Lori, a sophomore was very enthusiastic about the orientation experiences she had as a freshmen and her ideas to improve the orientation program at the school. She also discusses her feelings on the academic preparation she received, the skills she began to develop through the orientation process, and most importantly, the social adjustment she made to the college.

I really didn't know what to expect when I came to the orientation program. I thought I would have contact with a lot of the other new students, and get to know the college and the people. I feel the orientation program met these beginning expectations and much more because it was the absolute best way to meet people. I think that was the biggest part of the orientation for me was meeting new people. I met everyone in the class and got to know almost all their names in those first few days which made the adjustment to college easier. This is what made orientation such a valuable experience, the meeting of new people and interacting with them. I think it is also the best way to become familiar with the college and the faculty.

I really liked the activity we had called "Playfair" because it was a way to meet people in a fun environment and use physical activity to get rid of some of the anxiety I think we all had those first few days. The other things that were good were the orientation leaders helping me move into my room and the icebreakers to meet people. Other activities that I think were really good were meeting with the faculty through the "Connections" mentoring program, and the Activity Fair where we found out about groups and clubs on campus. I don't think I would be as involved on campus now if I hadn't met people who encouraged me to join some groups on campus. The membership in these groups has been a great source of support and interaction for me.

I think the activities with the faculty and orientation leaders helped me become more confident and comfortable with other people, encouraged me to ask for help, and in many ways taught me to solve problems. I met many people who were willing to answer my questions, support me in making decisions, and treat me as an intelligent person even if I didn't know much about the situation or college. The orientation made me feel as if I was a part of the community on campus and that I had something important to give to the activities even if I was scared and nervous.

I think for me, the least helpful parts of the orientation were programs about alcohol, drugs, and AIDS because I heard a lot of this information before and it was really boring to listen to the lectures. I thought the campus tour was good, but the information on the computer lab, academic preparation, and class expectations were not that helpful because we went through it too fast and weren't really concerned with it at that time. There just isn't time to think about classes, what questions to ask, or what I needed to know to be successful academically. This is where being involved in giving suggestions for the workshops after orientation is really great because I suggested that computer skills, library skills, and academic study skills be presented in these workshops. I also suggested various faculty should teach some short courses to prepare us for future classes in their areas. I also think it would be great if we could have some time for word processing skills, building teamwork, and communications skills.

The second interview is based on the information given by a junior named Joe who had some interesting ideas for the orientation program as well as the workshops which were to be conducted after the initial week-long orientation program. The emphasis in this interview is somewhat similar to that of the first interview, and is fairly typical of what many of the students discussed throughout the interview process. The interviews are similar in the focus placed on the social aspect by Lori, and the social as well as functional aspects by Joe.

When I came to campus for orientation I expected to have a lot of fun and meet many people because I felt like it was a rite of passage into college. I didn't expect it to be as much fun as it turned out to be with all the social activities and interaction we had with other students. I got to know the campus, faculty, and other students really well during orientation and many of these people are still close friends. I think it was really great that I learned the names and faces of almost all the other freshmen which made me feel like I was a part of something very big. I would have to say that the orientation experience met and exceeded my expectations of what the beginning of college should be for students which was a lot of fun.

I think for me orientation was a very valuable experience because I met many people who have become my friends, learned the names of the staff and faculty, and most importantly I felt comfortable being here. The first few days were pretty scary with no family here for support, but I learned that everyone else felt this way too and it made me feel less alone. I think orientation is the best way to meet people, become familiar with the college, and adjust to the new experiences of college. I think something that has helped me is that I learned to ask questions and who to ask these questions so I got the right answers. I feel like I can solve most of my own problems and that there are people out there that support me if I need help at any time. The orientation program really helped me feel more confident that I wanted to be here and that I could succeed. The one activity I think has been an important factor for me has been the involvement in various groups during my time here. I would probably not belong to these groups if I had not learned about them during orientation. I have also made many friends in these groups that I first met at the orientation that encouraged me to join and become active in other organizations on campus.

The areas I found least helpful during the orientation program were those about financial aid because they repeated information as did the ones about drugs and AIDS. The faculty lectured instead of discussing some of the issues with us which made it really boring and uninformative. I also felt like the campus tour was

somewhat helpful, but that information on the library, computer lab, and faculty expectations for classes were over my head those first few days. There just isn't enough time to learn and remember everything in the beginning and I felt like serious information about school was wasted on me in the week-long orientation. I feel that the workshops after the week-long orientation need to address issues such as word processing, E-mail, using the Internet, and especially leadership skills. These are all areas that will help me find a job in the future and I want to have more time to learn about them.

These interviews tend to support the information presented in the literature that some issues are not adequately addressed in a short orientation program of a few days, one week, or perhaps even several weeks of workshops. These students discussed the importance of social interaction at the beginning of their college careers, but also focused on the importance of academic, team building, communications, and leadership skills for their success in college and the future. The results indicate the need for all three stages of an orientation program at colleges and universities to provide social adjustment to the college, give students a good basis for academic preparation, and develop personal skills that will assist them in becoming successful both in college and their lives after college. This study and other studies indicate the need for both social and academic interaction for freshmen because some students benefit from the social experience, some from the academic experience, and some from both experiences.

The purposes, focuses, and uses of orientation programs have a sound theoretical base in the work of Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser (1993) and Alexander Astin (1984) in their respective psychosocial and involvement theories. The responses to orientation described in the literature and interviews with these students are an introduction to and perhaps the initial stages of development in these theories.

The theory of Arthur Chickering proposes that students move through several "vectors" during their first years of college from developing personal competence to the ability to respect the beliefs of other people as a means of reaching a world view of social responsibility. The students I interviewed who experienced success during the orientation

process and made a social and academic adjustment to college as freshmen appeared to be moving through these vectors smoothly as upperclassmen. The literature also supports this view through increased retention rates, higher GPAs, and greater academic success of students who make a successful transition to college.

The involvement theory of Alexander Astin explains the effects of environmental influences on student development. Astin (1984) describes student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to their academic experience" (p. 297). The involved student is one who devotes time to study, participates in campus organizations, and interacts with other students. The more a student is involved in the academic and social environment, the greater the learning experience for the student. The literature suggests students who become involved in the culture and environment of the college will more strongly bond to the institution and become more successful students. The students I interviewed clearly identified the importance of being introduced to various groups on campus. They also discussed meeting new people who belonged to organizations on campus and the importance these organizations had in helping them feel comfortable on campus. The involvement of incoming students in activities and organizations on campus is a primary function of the orientation program which has long term effects for students.

Implications

The orientation program appears to be an essential component in the enrollment management plan of colleges and universities. This unique program has developed from a simple idea into a broad and far-reaching program which has undergone and will continue to undergo, changes to meet the needs of new students who are entering institutions of higher learning. The goals, purposes, and development of orientation programs are supported both by theory and student retention.

The goals and activities of an orientation program must be tailored to the individual institution to accentuate its strengths and attenuate its weaknesses, as well as develop its culture and mission. The characteristics of students entering the college or university must be a determining factor in the development of the orientation program because students are no longer a homogeneous group. Orientation must be flexible to adapt to the social, developmental, and academic needs of the students and the parents.

Evaluation of an orientation program must be a process that involves the students, faculty, staff, and administration at each college or university. Evaluation of programs can be determined by several factors which may include better retention rates, higher GPAs, improved student satisfaction, or other factors the institution values. The development of a successful orientation program requires the establishment of clearly defined goals, standards of achievement in reaching these goals, and an effective method for evaluating the success or failure of the program. The review of literature and findings of interviews support the use of a three-step orientation program which involves some form of pre-orientation, an orientation day or week, and a post-orientation component. As a result, these are some implications concerning an orientation program:

1. The goals of the orientation program must be clearly stated and the level of success measurable.
2. Students should be involved in the planning and evaluation of the orientation program to the greatest extent possible.
3. Faculty, staff, and administrator involvement in the orientation program is essential to assist students in the adjustment to college, and in developing realistic expectations of the commitment to education.
4. The orientation program must contain both social and academic components to meet the needs of all students.
5. The college or university must assess the mission, culture, and expectations it will convey to students through the orientation program.

6. The literature strongly supports the use of a pre-orientation, orientation week or day, and post-orientation model to adequately support the needs of incoming freshmen.

Concluding Remarks

Orientation has developed and changed over time from the programs at Boston University and Reed College to become much more comprehensive in meeting the developmental, social, and academic needs of students who are entering institutions of higher learning. Therefore, the continuing role of a comprehensive orientation program can not be ignored as a vital step in the social adjustment of students to the college and academic environment. In addition, the findings of this paper support the use of a three-stage orientation program which includes student participation in the planning and evaluation steps as a successful method for meeting the needs of students. The orientation program has and will continue to become a strong link to the mission and culture of colleges and universities.

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