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*Golam Mannan, Gerald C. Preusz*

## New Student Orientation on an Urban Commuter Campus

Urban commuter campuses share many similarities with traditional residential colleges and universities. While there are similarities, there are also many differences. One of the major differences is the diverse student body on the urban campus and the difficulty in providing necessary services and educational programs. Orientation programming is one of those essential services which need to be provided but which is extremely difficult to schedule. Campus authorities continually struggle to develop a systematic student orientation program which meets the needs of the students and enables them to successfully prepare for a significant learning experience.

A successful orientation program depends on two central variables. These variables are time and space. Orientation involves time. Students need time to get acclimated to the campus. They need time to talk to the counselors and to the faculty members. On most residential campuses orientation is scheduled from one to seven days. It is not enough to simply pour information into the student; it is necessary to give the student time to digest it. The student needs time to think, to grope, and to evaluate.

The need for time brings in the second variable: space. As the new students come to the campus, they need a place to stay. On residential campuses, dormitories are open during the orientation sessions. On many large university campuses, orientation sessions run for days and, for a set fee, students stay in the dorm and attend various sessions and workshops to plan their future.

On an urban commuter campus, both of these variables are at a premium. However, they must be considered with regard to the following relevant factors:

1. Commuter students have simultaneous commitments to work, school, and family. Consequently they find it unappealing to devote a considerable amount of time attending orientation sessions (Austin, 1975).
2. Many commuter students are first generation college students and there is no family tradition that reinforces the need for proper preparation and orientation before attending college. Thus, orientation does not seem to be an important activity at least not on the level of attending classes (Hall, 1974; Kasworm, 1980).
3. Students on urban commuter campuses commute and as such are not captive audiences to any presentations made by the University except for the classes they attend.

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4. Since students tend to spend minimum time on campus, any program developed must compete with other commitments. The program must be extrinsically remunerative or else the probability of its success will be minimal.
5. A large number of commuter students tend to be late about making up their minds about going to college. It would be difficult to plan orientation programs for them short of delaying their admission process. Thus, the only option available to the university is to halt admission after a certain date and admit the late students for the subsequent semester or quarter. In these days of declining enrollments and budgetary retrenchment or downsizing, few campuses would be willing to pursue that end.

The development of an orientation program on any urban commuter campus should also be concerned with the following generalized assumptions about the campuses themselves:

1. Usually, physical locations of buildings on an urban campus are not neatly arranged. Therefore, buildings may or may not be easily accessible.
2. A truly urban commuter campus may be scattered and at times sprawled throughout the city. In order for a student to carefully plan a schedule, he needs to be familiar with the campus. This is especially true when he has limited time for an education, job and other community activities.
3. Development of an on-going student-teacher relationship is hard to evolve. If a professor is available, the student hardly gets any extra time to pursue a point, ask a question or for that matter, socialize. Most student interactions with classmates are superficial and temporary with little opportunity for development of close personal relationships. Not unlike society in general, loneliness and isolation from other people and students in particular become a large part of urban college life.
4. There are very few dormitory spaces available on urban commuter campuses. But even if dormitories were available, to have the commuter student leave the familial and job obligations behind and spend days and nights on campus would be inappropriate and unacceptable. Therefore, the orientation program must be examined in terms of goals and directions more suited to the commuter students.

#### GOALS OF ORIENTATION

Orientation brings the university and the new students together. The university has certain expectations of the students; and the students, similarly, have some expectations of the university. Orientation is the time to cross-check these expectations and foster a healthy adjustment. The need for this mutual understanding of expectations is especially important on a commuter campus for several reasons:

1. A considerable majority of commuter campus students are marginally prepared academically.
2. Increasing numbers of older students are returning to campus and their years of absence has diminished their self confidence (Lana, et al. 1979).
3. The older students are not always aware of the demands that the university education places on their intellect, time, ability and resources.
4. Traditionally, the university expects students to be singularly motivated to the goals of higher education. Today, more than ever, the goals of higher education are diversified and campuses receive large numbers of students whose goal commitments are marginal and diversified. Therefore, it appears that a review of the objectives of orientation be examined.

#### SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF ORIENTATION

The specific objectives of orientation can be subdivided into three broad categories:

1. Academic Advising
2. Self and Goal Exploration
3. Orientation to the Campus

##### Academic Advising

The primary objective here is:

1. To assess the student's prior capabilities and academic preparation
2. To identify the needed courses consonant with the student's abilities and academic ambitions.

Achievement of these two objectives is not an easy task. It requires rapport and insight. It demands professional knowledge, and most importantly, it demands time. Quality academic advisement is a student-centered, developmental process rather than a prescriptive and clerical activity.

##### Self and Goal Exploration

Orientation is a time for exploration. More than anything else, the beginning students need to understand their own motivation for higher education. Many times there exists a dissonance between student expectations and the actualities of the educational environment. Students may have inaccurate and/or undefined expectations concerning their own educational goals and intellectual abilities. Furthermore, many students select higher education without a thorough examination of how that experience will enable them to capitalize on their own abilities toward the achievement of their educational and life goals.

In many ways the self and goal exploration may form a part of the broader concept of academic advising. However, the importance of this activity should not be minimized by relegating it to a secondary place behind the mechanical process of course selection. Self and goal exploration is especially crucial on urban commuter campuses because of the tentative nature of goal commitment which is so pervasive among large numbers of commuter students. A considerable number make up their minds late and their commitment to higher education is exploratory at best.

##### Orientation to the Campus

The transition from high school to college, from the security of a home environment to a campus, can be overwhelming. The objective of an orientation program should be to help students make this transition an easy one. It should help students develop positive attitudes about the university environment, help students learn the location of various offices that provide services for them, and meet various university personnel who are available to assist them. A university has its own set of academic guidelines and disciplinary and administrative rules and regulations. Failure to be acquainted with these may cause students undue hardship. It is not uncommon to find that many students lose refund money because they do not pay enough attention to or are not cognizant of the last date of withdrawal from classes without any fee penalty. Sometimes, students do not realize that withdrawal procedures must be initiated before official withdrawal from the university is possible. Failure to properly withdraw officially results in a failing grade.

As indicated earlier, a good orientation is a good beginning for developing a working relationship between the student and the university. It should be carefully planned, well-executed, and most of all, it should be incorporated as part of the university's academic process.

## ORIENTATION STRATEGIES ON A COMMUTER CAMPUS

There is, clearly, no single strategy for orientation on an urban commuter campus. One has to take each objective at a time and devise various strategies to achieve the objective. Alternatively, a smorgasboard of strategies may be developed with the hope that students will pick and choose and find what they need. Listed below are several ideas to consider.

1. **The In-class Orientation.** The first session of each academic semester is usually devoted to orientation to the course. Among other things, the instructor presumably discusses the objectives of the course, the content areas to be covered, the number and nature of tests, and the grading policy. Although it is tempting to start class or the academic lecture right away, the instructor in a freshman class could devote the session to orientation. The instructor could describe the university, the academic procedures and policies most pertinent to the student's survival, and then check with each student to see if there are any lingering questions related to the student's career goal, academic orientation, and academic advising. The objective of this session would be to set a climate where the student without being rushed into academic lectures, can take time to analyze and comprehend some of the most important steps necessary for success in college.

One of the chief problems with this system is that many faculty members may not be disposed to the idea or may not have the necessary training and information to handle such a session. A skill development and information workshop for faculty might be helpful in solving this problem. Also, Student Services personnel could visit the classes on the invitation of the instructor.

As students move from one class to another, they may find duplication of information. The same questions may be asked of the student in more than one class and the same information may be given more than once. In reality, this might be helpful. The questions might reinforce their thinking and memory. However, there is another way this problem can be resolved. The instructor might excuse the students who find the duplication unappealing. This will reduce the class size and bring the small group discussion to a manageable level. In a large class, the professor might recruit the more knowledgeable students to work with him and have several small group sessions at the same time.

2. **Rolling Orientation Programs.** These programs work well for large in-man class. Along with their admission notifications, the students could be scheduled for orientation sessions in groups of fifty to a hundred students. This will maintain the strategy of small group sessions and possibly of one to one acquaintances even on a large campus. On urban commuter campuses this will not put undue strain on resources, physical space, and time (Henderson, 1980).

However, possible repetition of the same theme or issues over and over again might tire the orientation personnel. Thus, as time goes by, they may not project themselves and the campus as positively as they would have on earlier sessions. The solution to this problem may lie in careful planning of the orientation dates and efficient rotation of orientation personnel. If the sessions are scheduled on dates apart from each other, the problem of staff routine could be avoided. Where the sessions are scheduled on shorter intervals, different groups of orientation personnel could be recruited from among the faculty and senior students.

A second problem might arise with those who are admitted late. There may not be enough time for orientation before registration. The

orientation sessions, in this case, could be organized right after the registration, maybe even during the first week of classes. In a rolling orientation program, it would be possible to identify students who have not attended an orientation session. One can further hope that the number of late admittees would be a manageable one.

3. **"One Shot" Survival Sessions.** These sessions would be conducted both before and immediately after registration. The sessions conducted before registration should cover the information necessary for a smooth registration (all the steps the students have to follow: academic advising; financial aid procedures, etc.). Also, this session should cover what is expected of the students, and the skills that are necessary for the student's survival at the institution.

A post-registration session should start with a post-mortem of the registration process. This would suggest a student voice in the process plus some valuable evaluation of the system. Also, this session should cover information about the various units within the institution that can be of help for the student's survival.

4. **Orientation Seminars.** The concept of an orientation seminar differs from the three approaches above in that this is not a one-time-only occasion. Part of the problem in the three approaches mentioned above lies in the amount of time that can be devoted to each session. The orientation seminar could be used as a healthy alternative to an intensive orientation session lasting for several days. The seminar could be conducted throughout the first semester of enrollment. In some colleges where this type of seminar is used, the seminar is conducted for the first half of the semester. Usually one to three credit hours are given for the seminar. These seminars cover a whole gamut of student concerns regarding the academic life of the university. The much needed experiences of self development, value and goal clarification and career exploration become basic ingredients of this course (Beck, 1980; Cohen and Jody, 1978; Sagaria, 1979).

The orientation seminars could, also, become a useful vehicle to conduct follow-up of the freshman advising process. It is always important to find out if the initial advising matched the expectations of the students and fared well against the realities of the classroom experiences. In addition, one can get further insight into other variables that are affecting the student's progress planning for the ensuing semester.

As indicated earlier, there is no single orientation process available to meet the needs of the diverse student populations found on urban commuter campuses. Instead, what is needed is a diverse and varied system of orientation; an orientation program that has many approaches. Since the problems of time and space cannot be altered, then the adjustment to those factors must be made by a diverse approach to orientation. Therefore, it is suggested that a combination of the above strategies be developed for a comprehensive program.

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## Orientation Programs and Practices: 1963 - 1981

### INTRODUCTION

Although orientation seems to be common vernacular among educators, there appears to be some degree of diversity in understanding what specifically is meant by orientation. In one perspective, Mueller (1951) suggests that orientation is the final stage of the overall admissions process. There are others who consider orientation as the beginning of a "continuing" program of personal development of the student. There are those, too, who view orientation as merely a "frill" to the educational experience.

In a recent study, Moore, et al (1979) identified three goals for orientation programs: (1) to ease the entry process with regard to items like placement tests, advising, and registration; (2) to offer students the opportunity of realistically assessing campus life; and (3) to familiarize students with the student affairs component of the university.

In a more philosophical sense, however, orientation can be viewed as being both microcosmic and macrocosmic in scope and depth of purpose. (Dannells and Kuh, 1964). Wigent (1971) identified the microcosmic programs as those that are primarily concerned with the student's immediate relationship with the institution, while the macrocosmic emphasis is more concerned with helping the new student understand the philosophy and general purposes of higher education.

Perhaps this diversity is more understandable when one considers that various forms of orientation are found in all walks of life and under varying labels. For instance, the military has boot camp or basic training and business corporations have detailed management trainee programs. No matter what they are labeled, however, the underlying or fundamental purpose is the same: to bridge some existing gap between the familiar past and the unfamiliar future.

### PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this research was to follow up a 1963 study of orientation programs for new students in twelve selected colleges and universities across the United States. A secondary purpose was to expand the initial survey in order to obtain additional data on orientation practices as well as to increase the sample from the original twelve institutions. The 1981 survey resulted in 110 colleges and universities responding to the questionnaire.

### METHODOLOGY

The 1963 study involved a survey of twenty colleges and universities selected from a review of the literature at that time. The institutions were selected

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