

## Transmogrification: Altering Our View of Orientation

Orientation, at Bradford College and many others, has been historically a time during which freshmen are welcomed, introduced to the campus and given an opportunity to settle in before the beginning of their college year. For the most part, freshmen are passive recipients of information and impressions, most of which is quickly forgotten.

Bradford College traditionally began its orientation three days before classes began. Freshmen arrived on a Saturday. During the day parents and freshmen were greeted in a formal meeting by the president and other officers of the college. Throughout the next two days, there were social events, meetings with advisors, placement testing, other meetings in which academic options and procedures of the college were explained to students, and registration.

### A New Proposal for Change

In the spring of 1984, the Dean of Students and the Academic Dean invited a group of students to meet with them to discuss orientation for the upcoming fall. During this discussion, the students expressed three major drawbacks of orientation as it was:

- 1) most of the information is quickly forgotten
- 2) students are too passive during the experience
- 3) students don't get to know each other well

From these comments came the decision to structure an orientation that would negate each of the drawbacks listed. It was felt that a more successful orientation would allow the new students to be active participants, giving them an opportunity to interact with faculty and administrators in an informal way, providing opportunities to get to know other freshmen well and giving each new student a sense of self-confidence.

### A New Design

Once the objectives listed above had been determined, the difficulty was in finding a program design that would allow all those positive experiences to occur. After much discussion, it was decided that the freshmen in the fall of 1984 would be asked to produce a show. 12 teams were assembled, comprised of a faculty or administrative member with an area of expertise and student assistants. A student was named producer of the show.

During the summer, each incoming freshman received a form asking them to list their areas of expertise or interest from the following list: artist, dancer, costumers, singer, technical theatre, musician,

publicity, photographers, public relations, make-up, management and writers. If the student did not return their form, a student affairs staff member read their application file carefully to make a decision as to where the student should be assigned. By the first day of orientation, all freshmen were assigned to a team.

Orientation began in the traditional way, with freshmen and parents arriving three days before the start of classes. A formal welcome by the administrative staff was given to students and parents that day, followed by a small group meeting for all new students with their advisors. A picnic that evening, followed by entertainment, finished the day.

Saturday morning began with placement testing in Math and English and then finally, the freshmen were introduced to the project for orientation. Initial reaction was incredulity mixed with anticipation - "we're going to do what?" From that moment on, the show was underway. Much time was given on Saturday to the groups to begin working together, formulating the task for their specific area of expertise. There was entertainment as well Saturday evening, allowing for a chance to relax. The schedule for the remainder of the weekend allowed time for the groups to work together, as well as setting aside time for a convocation, advising and registration.

Finally, curtain time arrived. The theme of the show was "Time Travel" and featured music, dancing and skits that were indicative of the 20's, 60's and 80's. The Class of '88 strutted their stuff proudly, to enthusiastic response from the audience of upperclassmen, administration and faculty.

### A Second Attempt

Having felt that the new design for orientation had been a success one year, the orientation planning committee for 1985-86 had to decide what the concept of the 1986 orientation would be. The goals remained the same - to have students actively involved, to give them a way to meet each other and faculty and administration, and to create a sense of self-confidence and excitement within each new student. Critiquing the first experimental orientation led us to one major flaw - not everyone had stayed involved with their groups throughout the orientation project. A major concern then became to create an orientation project in which each person would feel like a very necessary part of the project and would not drop out.

It was decided that a problem-solving task would allow each person in the group to utilize whatever talents they possessed and would create a feeling that everyone could be part of the answer. Once again, freshmen were divided into 12 small groups of 10 each. This time, they were not divided by talents. Instead, groups were balanced by sex and projected academic strength (according to high school performance). It was felt that high achievers could encourage and excite others with less academic motivation, as the groups began to know one another on a personal level.

The project design was this: each group received an assortment of materials including inner tubes, garbage bags, pieces of wood, balloons, paint and \$10. Between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon, each group had to build a floatable object that met specifications outlined in the project handbook. In a nutshell, the "boats" had to be able to navigate a campus lake, maneuver through an on land obstacle course and have artistic merit.

Teams were once again advised by two faculty members and two

peer advisors. Work on the project was scheduled around the necessary elements of placement testing, advising and registration. The creations were displayed outside Sunday afternoon in a heated competition. There was laughter, amazement and once again, a feeling of successful accomplishment.

#### Evaluation

After each of the orientations, freshmen were asked to complete an evaluation form to assess how closely the goals that had been met. The evaluation focused on both the mechanical processes (like check-in, registration, etc.) and the cognitive/affective aspects. Overwhelmingly, the feedback received regarding the group experiences were positive. The responses usually indicated that students felt that they had been able to make friends quickly.

Comments received included the following:

"gained much confidence, met my best friend and learned

how to be me"

"made it (college) feel like a family situation"

"felt comfortable and at home or like a family situation"

"made me feel comfortable because I made a fool of myself"

In addition, comments made immediately following each orientation were enthusiastic and positive. The student affairs staff also noticed that freshmen began to take **very** active roles in college organizations immediately and to assume leadership positions readily.

#### Final Comment

It may be that Bradford College can design such innovative orientation programs because its entering classes are approximately 125 students. But larger colleges and universities often do several summer orientation programs, breaking down a large freshmen class into smaller units. This model could be adapted to a summer program schedule. After two successful designs based on an active orientation mode, Bradford College is committed to continuing in this direction. It requires a lot of brainstorming, creativity and willingness to take some risks, but it would appear that this type of orientation is more successful in helping freshmen make the transition to a new stage in their life.

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#### BOOK REVIEW

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## Making College Pay Off

by M. Lee Upcraft, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1984. 109 pages, \$8.95. (paper)

*Orienting Students to College* is Number 25 in the Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series: New Directions for Student Services. In the editor's notes Mr. Upcraft writes, "The purpose of this source book is to provide the orientation practitioner with the knowledge and methods to develop comprehensive and effective orientation programs and activities that enhance retention programs and facilitate personal growth and development." I feel that this is an understatement.

Although I recommend that orientation professionals read this volume, this is said with some qualification. This book can be read in one sitting, but my advice is to read one or two chapters at a time. While the book contains more "must" statements than I cared to read, once finished, this edition should be kept close at hand while reviewing and planning your programs as it will serve as an excellent reference and resource.

The first two chapters provide a contextual framework for the remaining chapters. The obligations of colleges and universities to society are overstated, however, the reader is challenged to look at orientation from a more global perspective. Chapter one, for instance, highlights five changes in society which have major implications for higher education. They are:

- the industrial society is changing into an information society;
- society is now dealing with the legacy of the "baby boom";
- sex roles are changing, particularly for women;
- personal issues are of more concern than societal issues; and,
- the rapid rate of social change is overwhelming.

The authors then observe "thus, if we are to understand the students of the 1980's and they are to understand themselves, we must analyze the major changes taking place in our society and their effects on students."

Chapter two presents an overview and definition of orientation and provides a rationale for the existence of orientation programs. A great many words are expended discussing components and methodologies of programs, and emphasis is placed on evaluation and its importance as a critical phase of any successful orientation program.

The succeeding chapters form a series of treatises on special populations. Each chapter is focused on one segment of the incoming class. Populations discussed are: traditional students; minority students; returning adult students; and transfer students.

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