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# Departmental and University Orientation: A Case Study on Competing Programs and Supportive Systems

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*University orientation programs typically rely on divisions of student affairs to build a system of student transition. With some help from academic departments, university wide orientations are loaded with the burdens of meeting a wide variety of institutional expectations while simultaneously responding to the personal needs of new students. Departmental orientation programs have evolved out of a combination of a need to transfer specific information about a major and to convey a sense of departmental expectation for student work and performance. The current study made use of a case study to identify the perceptions of current students about how university and departmental orientation programs do and should work together.*

New student orientation programs are designed to accomplish a variety of tasks, often dependent upon the situation of individual institutions (Twale, 1989). Some institutions, for example, stress the need for social structure development, while others concentrate on the logistical dimensions of registering for classes and paying bills. Yet others focus on the collegiate life and opportunities for involvement. What is generally assumed, though, is a notion that orientation and transitional programming has a purpose and that it is strategically developed to respond to student needs. The responsibility for this strategic development is typically housed in divisions of student affairs, although at times offices of academic affairs, and is generally assumed to be well coordinated throughout the institution. Balderston (1995), for example, stressed the need for institutions to be purposeful in their behavior to and build upon areas that enhance efficiency. Indeed, the overarching theme for orientation programs tends to be the institutional opportunity to convey messages about expectations for new students.

As transitional programs are increasingly looked to as a mechanism in the retention and student satisfaction equation, the importance of a highly coordinated orientation program becomes more important. The assumption about the strategic development and activities associated with orientation activities has become challenged, and institutions look to define clear purposes and missions for orientation. Increasingly, these mission statements look similar to retention objectives and less social in nature. The contemporary orientation program is defined by its purposive, defined, programming that responds to the whole student with an eye toward retention. In fact, most college offices have changes significantly, focusing increasingly more on externally identified criterion (Campbell, 2000). Although orientation programs still hold "fun" as a hallmark, the pressure placed on them to perform specific activities has been heightened (Mullendore, 1992).

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With a desconstructivist approach to orientation programming, critical questions are being asked about the role of the central institution and individual academic units. In some instances the conversation revolves around a university and colleges, and in others around the function of academic departments in a college. Regardless of institutional size the academic department is arising as the least common denominator and a central component in overall orientation strategic plan. The subsequent result is a critical conversation about what role the academic department, and the department chair, play in a holistic orientation program.

The current study was designed to present a case study of how students in one academic department viewed orientation and the responsibilities of the department and the university. Although limited to one department at a comprehensive university, the findings were intended to help initiate and formalize the conversation about purposive orientation programming.

## Background of the Study

Orientation programs do many different things. In some institutions orientation serves as primary way for new students to get to know each other. In other institutions, orientation teaches students how to take notes and navigate campus. In yet other institutions, students learn how to register for classes and pay their bills. In most institutions, these are all combined into an intense institutional program of interest and concurrent sessions all designed to give new students a general sense of what is expected of them in their new environment (Stephenson, 1997). This, after all, is the primary focus of divisions of student affairs; the integration of student services into academic domains for the intellectual and social growth of students (Barr, 1997). Even the national guidelines for new student orientation, those advanced by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), include 20 different purpose statements for a new student orientation program. And despite the clarity of the Standards for New Student Orientation (CAS, 1988), there remains a variety of intended outcomes and expectations.

These high expectations for new student orientation programs come from a number of sources, most notably, their high impact potential. Successful transition programs can increase student academic achievement, increase retention rates, increase the likelihood of collegiate involvement, reduce risks of unhealthy behavior, and can generally increase levels of student satisfaction. Faculty involvement in transitional and other student affairs programs can especially result in better student performance (Miller, Newman, & Adams, 1999). With such power to significantly impact the undergraduate student's life, these programs continue to receive an increased amount of attention and focus from all levels of institutional administration.

Although programs may have an overarching theme, the logistics of new student programming can be challenging, and considering changes in student experiences, programming can be difficult to project (see Tapscott, 1998 for changes to student experiential base). Fears and Denke (2001) highlighted some of the challenges of assembling and executing a wilderness orientation activity, for example, and Nadler, Miller, and Casebere (1998) have outlined a variety of activities all undertaken in the

quest to build an orientation program that new students would find meaningful and satisfying. And as both of these studies have suggested, the social aspects of new student programs have received the majority of attention. Academic programming has tended to be related to those activities coordinated by the institution without regard for intricacies of individual academic majors or departments.

The difficulties of academic advising are most commonly associated with departmental orientation activities, as individual departments focus their attention less on social interactions and primarily on the technical aspects of life as a student in the particular major. Individual department chairs and their faculty members typically coordinate this departmental sub-component of institutional orientation, and a number of challenges are associated with this type of programming. Challenges include, for example, the difficulty of arranging for faculty interactions and programs when the faculty members themselves are not participating in campus activities during the summer months, the difficulty of understanding the unique needs of new students, the lack of a reward structure for this type of faculty-centered activity, finances, and coordination with institutional orientation activities.

In light of the importance of departmental cooperation and provision of orientation programs or modules, it will be helpful to understand what students think are important for departments to provide. Beginning a conversation about departmental responsibilities has the potential to greatly impact how institutional programs attempt to respond to faculty involvement and the conveying of the institutional expectation of new students. Further, providing even the beginnings of the conversation can be important for department chairs, their faculty, and deans as they think about the defining the purpose of new student orientation programs and what their role is and should be. These same kinds of issues have tremendous transfer value to faculty and staff orientation programs. Subsequently, the current study provides a meaningful first-step in the discussion and has heuristic value for those concerned with the effectiveness and purpose of first-year student programming.

## Research Methods

As the current study was designed to be exploratory in nature, primarily descriptive data were sought. The data were collected using a 17-item survey instrument modeled after the Nadler, Miller, and Casebere (1998) survey used at a case study institution in the southeastern United States. According to their research reporting, the instrument use methodology was accepted to be valid and reliable. The instrument contained the CAS Standards, and asked respondents to identify whether they perceived orientation purpose to be the responsibility of university or college-wide orientation programs, or conversely, departmental orientation programs. Respondents were then asked to rate their perceived level of importance for each item using a 1-to-5 Likert-type scale, where 1=No importance progressing to 5=Great importance.

Students enrolled in a child development major at an urban university were selected for study. The exploratory nature of the investigation provided a rationale for this sampling strategy. Of the 200 full-time equivalent undergraduate student majors,

the instrument was distributed in three different classes. Institutional data indicate that these students were primarily traditional, female college students studying to assume professional positions in childcare or public school teaching. Data were collected throughout the fall 2001 academic semester.

## Findings

A total of 56 survey instruments were returned for use in data analysis, representing 28% of the total student population in this major. Due to incomplete or missing data, however, only 49 survey instruments were used in analysis, yielding a valid 25% of the undergraduate enrollment. Responding students clearly saw a distinction between what the academic departments and the university orientations should be undertaking. Over three-fourths of the students (83%), for example, reported that the academic department should be responsible for helping students identifying the amount of personal commitment required for success in college. Conversely, 92% of the students identified that the university orientation program should be responsible for assisting new students in understanding the purpose(s) of the university. Based on simple majority of identification, and as shown in Table 1, responding students identified 11 of the CAS Standards as being best addressed by departmental orientation activities. And as shown in Table 2, responding students had three significant differences in rating their importance, and in each instance, the higher rating was provided to the departmental-orientation responsibility.

Generally, the CAS Standards had a relatively high rating of agreement, meaning that they are important and significant to orientation professionals who undergo programming. This is supported by the overall high mean ratings, where only three items were rated below the "Neutral" rating, and only a total of five were agreed to below the 3.5 level. The highest four rated CAS Standards, which each had levels of importance above 4.0, were: provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enable me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions (mean 4.19), create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning (mean 4.15), provide appropriate information on personal safety and security (mean 4.04), and provide information about how to assess my success in college (mean 4.04).

The ratings for the departmental responsibility provided mean importance ratings of 4.0 or higher to five different standards. The three most important (highest) ratings were: Provide information about how to assess my success in college (4.31), Provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enable me to make reasoned and well informed decisions (4.13), Provide information and exposure to available institutional services (4.11), assist me in determining my purpose(s) in attending the university (4.00), and assist me in understanding the purpose(s) of the university (4.00).

The ratings for university orientation were similarly inconsistent, with importance means ranging from the mid-4.0 to mid-2.0 range. The highest rated items within the university-orientation identified CAS standards were: create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning

(4.47), provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enable me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions (4.27), provide appropriate information on personal safety and security (mean 4.09), and assist me in developing familiarity with physical surroundings (mean 4.00).

## Discussion and Conclusions

Findings clearly indicate that current students do not think that university-sponsored or university-wide new student orientation programs must include all activities and address all services by themselves. Quite to the contrary, the responding students clearly indicated that the academic department can be a better location for teaching new students about certain types of activities, such as helping new students identify the amount of personal time required for success in college. This type of indication can be the result of many things, such as a student's belief that those in the department understand "college life" better than those in the student services areas, the feeling that the academic department has the potential to give greater depth to understanding about studying for major classes, and there is always the possibility that because these students were already in a declared major, they conveyed perhaps what they want now rather than what they would have wanted coming into college.

And based on the setting for data collection and the respondents, perhaps the greatest benefit of these findings are the questions raised and put to orientation professionals: how can orientation and transitional programs be best suited to address student needs, what types of programs really empower new students to ask questions about how to achieve personal and academic success, what role should the other offices on campus play in helping new students learn about their new campus environment? The larger questions of orientation program intention are also raised, stressing the need for orientation program staffs to calibrate their programming direction with student and institutional needs. This triangulation has historically been directed by tradition and replication, however, with projections for large incoming first-year student cohorts, the need for efficient and effective programming is paramount.

The other substantial overarching theme expressed in these findings relates to who should be making decisions about what to include in new student programs. Coordinating or steering committees are often helpful tools to the student orientation staff and can help bridge the gap between student and academic affairs.

These findings indicate that orientation professionals need to be purposeful in their program planning and need to facilitate a holistic approach to orientation that includes a variety of campus offices and academic departments. Findings, although exploratory, seem to send a strong message that students expect academic departments to play a meaningful role in their transition to campus. A task for department chairs and leading faculty, orientation professionals need to find ways to work with these departmental representatives to build programs that are student-centered.

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TABLE 1

**Department or University Orientation Responsibility and Importance**
N=49

| Orientation Purpose | Responsibility* D | U | Importance** Mean | SD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enable me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions. | 29 | 18 | 4.19 | .92 |
| Create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning. | 30 | 17 | 4.15 | .98 |
| Provide appropriate information on personal safety and security. | 6 | 41 | 4.04 | .83 |
| Provide information about how to assess my success in college. | 32 | 16 | 4.04 | 1.01 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with university faculty. | 34 | 15 | 3.80 | 1.22 |
| Assist me in determining my purpose(s) in attending the university. | 25 | 24 | 3.80 | 1.19 |
| Assist me in identifying the amount of personal commitment required for my success in college. | 40 | 8 | 3.75 | 1.25 |
| Assist me in understanding the university's expectations of me. | 28 | 20 | 3.67 | 1.12 |
| Provide information and exposure to available institutional services. | 18 | 28 | 3.62 | 1.07 |

| Orientation Purpose | Responsibility* | | Importance** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | D | U | Mean | SD |
| Provide opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students. | 31 | 16 | 3.62 | 1.05 |
| Promote an awareness of non-classroom opportunities. | 26 | 22 | 3.50 | 1.29 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with university staff. | 28 | 20 | 3.50 | 1.15 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with other new students. | 27 | 21 | 3.44 | 1.15 |
| Assist me in developing familiarity with physical surroundings. | 4 | 42 | 3.00 | 1.12 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with individuals from the community. | 22 | 24 | 2.87 | 1.19 |
| Assist me in understanding the purpose(s) of the university. | 3 | 45 | 2.85 | 1.07 |
| Assist me in understanding the mission of the university. | 5 | 43 | 2.81 | 1.10 |

***D=Department responsibility, U=university responsibility.**

****Importance level measured on a 1-5 Likert-type scale, where 1=No Importance progressing to 5=Great Importance.**

TABLE 2

**Comparison of Department and University Orientation Responsibility Attribution and Importance**
N=49

| Orientation Purpose | Response<br>D<br>U | Importance<br>Mean | <br>SD | f ratio | *f* prob |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Provide an atmosphere and sufficient information that enable me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions. | 29<br>18 | 4.137<br>4.27 | .915<br>.958 | .2502 | .6193 |
| Create an atmosphere that minimizes anxiety, promotes positive attitudes, and stimulates an excitement for learning. | 30<br>17 | 3.96<br>4.47 | 1.09<br>.624 | 3.009 | .0896 |
| Provide appropriate information on personal safety and security. | 6<br>41 | 3.66<br>4.09 | .516<br>.860 | 1.413 | .2407 |
| Provide information about how to assess my success in college. | 32<br>16 | 4.31<br>3.50 | .737<br>1.26 | 7.924 | .0072* |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with university faculty. | 34<br>15 | 3.85<br>3.66 | 1.15 | .2371 | .6286 |
| Assist me in determining my purpose(s) in attending the university. | 25<br>24 | 4.00<br>3.58 | 1.19 | 1.517 | .2241 |
| Assist me in identifying the amount of personal commitment required for my success in college. | 40<br>8 | 3.80<br>3.50 | 1.26<br>1.19 | .3812 | .5400 |
| Assist me in understanding the university's expectations of me. | 28<br>20 | 3.89<br>3.64 | 1.03<br>1.20 | 2.863 | .0974 |
| Provide information and exposure to available institutional services. | 18<br>28 | 4.11<br>3.39 | .963<br>.956 | 6.147 | .0171* |

| Orientation Purpose | Response<br>D<br>U | Importance<br>Mean | <br>SD | f ratio | *f* prob |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Provide opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with continuing students. | 31<br>16 | 3.70<br>3.43 | 1.131<br>.892 | .6991 | .4075 |
| Promote an awareness of non-classroom opportunities. | 26<br>22 | 3.65<br>3.31 | 1.354<br>1.210 | .8057 | .3741 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with university staff. | 28<br>20 | 3.28<br>3.80 | 1.212<br>1.005 | 2.409 | .1275 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with other new students. | 27<br>21 | 3.81<br>2.95 | 1.110<br>1.023 | 7.621 | .0083* |
| Assist me in developing familiarity with physical surroundings. | 4<br>42 | 3.75<br>4.00 | 1.258<br>1.195 | 1.860 | .1795 |
| Assist me in developing positive relationships with individuals from the community. | 22<br>24 | 2.909<br>2.833 | 1.191<br>1.203 | .0559 | .8314 |
| Assist me in understanding the purpose(s) of the university. | 3<br>45 | 4.00<br>2.77 | 1.000<br>1.042 | 3.882 | .0548 |
| Assist me in understanding the mission of the university. | 5<br>43 | 3.60<br>2.72 | .8944<br>1.098 | 2.956 | .0922 |

*Denotes a statistically significant difference was identified through the one-way Analysis of Variance at the .05 alpha level.