Meeting the Needs of Female First Year Students: How Well Does Orientation Work?

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Women have traditionally represented over half of the undergraduate population of college enrollment, and this trend is expected to continue with projections that women will represent 58% of college enrollment in 2010. With this change, researchers and practitioners have had to become more aware of and provide programming for women. The current exploration provides an analysis of how women perceive a summer orientation program compared to their male counterparts.

The population of women has contributed to over 50% of the total enrollment of higher education for over 20 years. An analysis of their enrollment in 1998 shows that women constituted 57% of all college students compared with only 52% in 1985 (NCES, 2000). Additionally, women earn over 50% of all bachelor and master's degrees and 33% of all Ph. D.'s (Vetter & Babco, 1986). Due to this change in enrollment, leaders in higher education have reassessed their theories and philosophies to ensure that the academic and social needs of women are met. Even though there have been increased college entrance and completion rates of women, the experiences of women in college are different from those of men (Astin, 1985; Magolda & Baxter, 1990). Research ahs suggested that almost as immediately as women set foot on college campuses they experience various forms of gender bias both in and out of the classroom that are detrimental to their success. As a result, new student orientations must respond in an effective manner to the unique needs of female students.

Orientation programs are an important mechanism in the transition of new students to higher education and often are relied upon to serve as a means for the institution to convey common expectations to these students. In addition to facilitating the initial course selection and registration at most institutions, orientation programs introduce students to the offices and services of the campus which can assist them in making their matriculation at the institution successful and rewarding. Orientation also prepares new students for a wide range of personal and social issues, challenges, and opportunities. Attention has increasingly been paid to the first year of college student matriculation because this period typically has the highest dropout rate (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Tinto, 1993).

During the last two decades, research has demonstrated that the success of an orientation program has become a significant factor in impacting student retention. This research has publicized the positive relationship between assessed educational outcomes of participation in student orientation programs with student satisfaction, institutional environment and student persistence (Astin, 1977). Despite this, many programs lack a

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tool to perform adequate assessments. The current study analyzed female student perceptions of one institution's first-year new student summer orientation program.

In their study of the cognitive outcomes of women during the first year of college, Pascarella, Whitt, Edison, Nora, Yeager, Terenzini, & Hagedorn (1996) noted a variety of research focusing on gender differences and gender-related effects, including the development of self-esteem and vocational aspirations (Arnold & Denny, 1985; Holland & Eisenhart, 1990), development of identity (Josselson, 1987; Kascack, 1992), development of intellectual reasoning (Baxter Magolda, 1988; 1992; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), course- and major-related learning and participation (Ethington & Wolfle, 1988; Hall & Sandler, 1982; Maher & Tetreault, 1994), leadership development (Astin & Leland, 1991; Whitt, 1994), and the general effects of college (Astin, 1993; Astin 1977). These studies have suggested that the participation of women in certain college experiences have a negative effect on their personal and intellectual development.

The Association of American Colleges Project on the Status and Education of Women published a report in 1982 that suggested that the coeducational setting in higher education was not conducive to the successful development of women (Hall & Sandler, 1984). They described a 'chilly classroom/campus climate' which was the result of the conduct of both faculty and students that were unwelcoming to women. In this environment, which was deemed detrimental to women's academic, personal, and professional development, women experienced situations where faculty respected men's input more seriously than women's, faculty requested men's participation over women's in class, and faculty and students made stereotypical comments about women's intellectual abilities.

The out-of-class experiences of women also contribute to their successful development in college. As with in-class experiences, there are some environments that are characterized as chilly. Hall and Sandler (1984) described these climates that were characterized by 'micro-inequities,' which were behaviors or practices that were gender biased, such as hiring, promotion, salary decisions, making derogatory statements about women, and sexual humor. Even though micro-inequities transcend gender biases to include race and age discrimination, they are significant in leaving those who experience them professionally and socially isolated, restricts their opportunities to participate professionally, and diminishes their willingness to participate in collegial and academic activities (Sandler, 1986).

Pascarella and et al. (1996) employed the concept of the chilly campus climate to determine whether this environment would inhibit the cognitive growth of women during the first year of college. Their study found that women's perceptions of a chilly campus climate was associated with lower levels of cognitive development and lower levels of self-reported gains in a variety of tasks related to cognitive and curricular aspects of college.

These inequities contribute significantly to the development of women in higher education. Women who experience these campus and classroom climates are less likely to participate, have lower levels of class attendance, have lower career and professional aspirations, and also display lower levels of self-confidence. Additionally, these

conditions can have adverse effects on the recruitment and retention of women students in higher education.

Study Design and Collection of Data

Administrators and faculty at a large Mid-Western research university utilized the CAS standards to develop an instrument to assess female first year students in an orientation program. The results were to be used to make modifications to the orientation and to determine its effectiveness in meeting the CAS recommendations.

The instrument consisted of four sections, the first of which had relevance to the current study. This first section contained 17 questions developed using the CAS Standards for New Student Orientation Programs. These questions focused on each student's assessment of whether the program was successful in introducing them to the campus mission, programs, faculty, staff, and fellow students. A Likert-type scale of 1-to-5, where 1=Strong Disagreement, 3=Neutral Perceptions, and 5=Strong Agreement, was used in this section. The instrument was tested for reliability and validity prior to its use by administering to an expert panel. Modifications were subsequently made, and the survey was re-evaluated for face validity.

During the summer of 2001, participants in the annual new student orientation program were given the instrument as they checked out of their living areas on the final day of the program. Of the 749 participants, 143 responded (19%), and of that number, 139 (18.5%) were usable in this study. There were 75 female respondents and 64 male respondents. Despite the low percentage response, the number of responses was considered acceptable considering the relative exploratory nature of the study.

Data Analysis

In examining the data, there were three items that were rated high by female respondents (Table 1). They rated the statement that the orientation program created an atmosphere that minimized anxiety, promoted positive attitudes, and stimulated an excitement for learning the highest (mean=4.89). The female participants also reported that the program benefited them in establishing positive relationships with fellow students (mean, 4.60), and they perceived that the program promoted an awareness of non-classroom opportunities (4.55). These contrasted slightly with the three items that male respondents rated the highest, which included providing information and exposure to available institutional services (4.98), assisted in developing positive relationships with institutional staff (4.44), and provided opportunities to discuss expectations and perceptions with present/continuing students (4.05).

As also shown in Table 1, the four items that were rated the lowest by female respondents were: assisted in developing positive relationships with individuals from the community (3.75); assisted in determining a purpose in attending this institution (4.05); assisted in developing positive relationships with the institution's faculty (4.05); and provided an atmosphere and sufficient information to make reasoned and well-informed

decisions (4.10). From the perspective of male respondents, the lowest rated items were: assisted the respondent in developing positive relationships with individuals from the community (3.52); assisted in identifying the amount of personal commitment required for my success at the institution (4.00); provided information about how to assess personal success at the institution (4.03); and assisted in developing positive relationships with institutional faculty (4.05).

To determine if there were any significant differences in any of the responses of the two groups, a statistical analysis was performed using t-tests for independent samples. There were no significant statistical differences in any of the 17 items analyzed (Table 1).

Conclusions

Colleges and universities have experienced significant shifts in the demographic composition of their campuses based on gender over the last 50 years. Increasingly, female students are matriculating on these campuses. This change creates a new challenge for student personnel professionals in that they have to overcome their t raditional male dominated theories of student development in programming efforts. They must strive to ensure that female students do not feel alienated or experience chilly academic and non-academic settings on their campuses. As orientation programs are the first student programming for transitioning students, it is important that orientation directors implement programs based on recent research on female student development theory that will assist these students in their successful transition into the institution.

The study results suggested that there were no statistical differences in the items rated by the respondents based on gender. However, there were some differences based on rank of the items. Female students seemed to have perceived an absence of contacts with individuals from both the local community and from the faculty. As orientation personnel develop programs, it is important that they include female leaders from the community and from the faculty ranks in their programming. Even though including faculty who teach first year students in programming would be important, it would also be advantageous to include others also who are student-oriented. Their participation and interaction with new female students may benefit these new students in their transition.

Another area that possibly should be addressed is that of the female students determination of their purpose for attending the institution and also gaining sufficient information to make reasonable and informed decisions. Research has shown that students who have unclear or uncertain academic goals are more prone to drop out of college (Noel, Levitz, Saluri, & Associates, 1985). Additionally, if students are not able to successfully integrate into the college campus they are less likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, developing orientation programs that allow students to become familiar with all student services and campus resources are important to their becoming comfortable in their new environment.

An interesting dimension that has appeared almost simultaneously with the shift in gender has been a shift in the average age of college students. More non-traditional

students are entering higher education, including those who are enrolling for the first time due to life circumstances and those who are enrolling to receive additional training for advancement or job changes. These students' motivation for attending are different than those of traditional students (Walleri & Peglow-Hoch, 1988; Metzner & Bean, 1987). These adult students encounter problems such as role conflict, time management, family and work conflicts, economics, and logistics, which all can be detrimental to their persistence (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering 1989). Orientation directors should be active in developing programs inclusive of campus services and resources that address these circumstances that this unique group of students encounter.

As the population of women on college campuses continues to increase, the traditional assumptions about their collegiate experience, their learning, and their development will be irrelevant in the future. However, until that becomes a reality, orientation directors need to be active in providing new student orientation programs that are conducive to the success of female students. If transitional programs are successful in providing female students with exposure to the services, personalities, and other resources of the institution in an open and welcoming manner, female students can be assured of a more positive overall matriculation

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TABLE 1

Perceptions of female and male students regarding the orientation program

	Female Mean (SD)	Male Mean (SD)	t	Sig.
Assisted me in understanding the purpose(s) of the institution (i.e., academic, career, etc.).	4.21 (.64)	4.22 (.86)	-.420	.97
Assisted me in understanding the mission of the institution (i. e., research, teaching, and service).	4.21 (.64)	4.14 (.89)	.558	.58
Assisted me in determining my purpose(s) in attending this institution.	4.05 (.88)	4.16 (.99)	-.646	.52
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with faculty.	4.05 (.97)	4.05 (1.03)	.038	.97
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with staff.	4.24 (.85)	4.15 (.99)	.535	.59
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with other new students.	4.60 (.59)	4.44 (.91)	1.27	.21
Assisted me in developing positive relationships with individuals from the community.	3.75 (1.08)	3.52 (1.07)	1.26	.21
Assisted me in understanding the institution's expectations of me.	4.17 (.69)	4.11 (.89)	.480	.63
Provided information about how to assess my success at this institution.	4.28 (.63)	4.03 (.87)	1.95	.05
Assisted me in identifying the amount of personal commitment required for my success.	4.15 (.88)	4.00 (.93)	.96	.34
Provided an atmosphere and sufficient information that enabled me to make reasoned and well-informed decisions.	4.10 (.67)	4.25 (.76)	-1.29	.20
Promoted an awareness of non-classroom opportunities.	4.55 (.50)	4.33 (.88)	1.78	.08

	Female Mean (SD)	Male Mean (SD)	t	Sig.
Assisted me in developing familiarity with the physical surroundings.	4.37 (.76)	4.27 (.94)	.69	.49
Provided information and exposure to available institutional services.	4.27 (.69)	4.21 (.79)	-.86	.39
Created an atmosphere that minimized anxiety, promoted positive attitudes, and stimulated an excitement for learning.	4.32 (.60)	4.98 (6.45)	1.11	.27
Provided appropriate information on personal safety and security.	4.89 (4.60)	4.21 (.87)	.53	.60
Provided opportunities to discuss Expectations and perceptions with Continuing students.	4.32 (.76)	4.35 (.83)	-.25	.80