

## From Orientation Leaders to Student Orientation Coordinators: An Orientation Staffing Redesign Process

*Brenda McKenzie*

Orientation programs ordinarily rely on students to provide staffing. These students “...are critical to the success of any orientation mission; they provide guidance to all orientation participants through role modeling and information sharing” (Pretty, p.8). According to Mullendore and Abraham (1993), “the selection, training and supervision of student orientation leaders are the key to a successful orientation program” (p. 69).

At Kent State, we experienced a history of difficulties in recruiting students to fill Orientation Leader (OL) positions. Over a period of three years, the number of applications we received decreased by 50%, and we particularly struggled to recruit men. There were a number of reasons for our recruitment challenges. First, the positions were voluntary and required a significant time commitment from the students between April and August. Next, while fulfilling the responsibilities of the position, the students did not have much contact with small groups of new students. If you were to ask a new student about the OLs, they would more likely identify the student instructor from their university orientation course than the students who staffed the orientation. In addition, the orientation structure did not allow for a significant amount of programming time, which again limited the “on-stage” time the OLs could receive. Finally, the structure did not allow for significant student input into the schedule. Due to these factors, we struggled to gain a high level of commitment to the program and were not very successful at retaining students to return for a second or third year.

During this period, the Office of Campus Life also attempted to identify alternatives to the current orientation structure. The primary goal was to lengthen the program from three to five days with the intention of providing more comprehensive and impacting experiences for new students.

Considering that there were inherent challenges with the OL recruitment process and the fact that we were moving forward with a program that would require more staff, the timing was right to examine our staffing structure and devise a process that supported our vision for the new program.

### Staff Structure Redesign Process

A small group was assembled to review and redesign the program staffing patterns. The group consisted of two full-time professionals, two graduate student staff, and two

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**Brenda McKenzie** is the Assistant Director of the Office of Campus Life at Kent State University.

Orientation Leaders (one who had been with the program for three years and another who had just completed her first year). We met for two hours each week over a period of seven weeks. Each meeting had its own focus, building on the discussions and decisions of the previous meeting.

At the initial meeting, we reviewed the current staffing structure. We also examined the various levels of orientation staffing: Orientation Leaders, returning OLs, and students who returned to OL role for a third year. The following questions guided our discussion:

- How is the Orientation Leader position perceived (internally and externally) and how do we want it to be perceived?
- How is the Returning Orientation Leader (ROL) position perceived (internally and externally) and how do we want it to be perceived?
- What is the purpose of the second- and third-year OL positions and should we continue to offer these positions?

At the conclusion of the first meeting, a chart of responses and a discussion summary were created. This information was shared with several additional Orientation Leaders for more student input on the perception of the role of the OL.

At the second meeting, we reviewed our orientation program format and how the staffing fit within that structure. Several future options were explored. As part of this discussion, we listed pros and cons for each possible structure and identified challenges to be overcome in order to implement any of the choices. When we had narrowed our choices to two possible structures, we met to discuss the best staffing for each option.

After these meetings, we provided the information generated to several additional OLs and members of the Orientation Advisory Board. To ensure we received feedback which would be both positive and constructive, we shared our ideas with individuals who had been supportive and with those who had been critical of the process.

Our final round of discussions focused on completing the new structure. One goal was to provide the student staff with a sense of ownership of the program. With this in mind, we created a proposal for six Student Orientation Coordinator (SOC) positions. These students would coordinate the schedule of events, including specific programs and publications as well as the recruitment, selection, and training of the Orientation Leaders. We spent a great deal of time deciding on the six specific positions and outlining their responsibilities. From this discussion, new job descriptions and applications were created, and a recruitment and selection process was designed. We also spent significant time developing the responsibilities and requirements for the OL position. Again, a new job description and timeline was sketched out for this segment of the staff.

## What Next?

After designing the structure, a proposal was submitted to lengthen the orientation program and to fund the SOC positions. We developed a projected budget for the recruitment, selection, and training of the two staffing positions. The proposal then was

forwarded to the director for final approval. We felt so strongly about the need for student involvement and ownership that our proposal allowed for the creation of the SOC positions, whether or not the structure of the orientation program changed.

When approval was given to the new staffing structure, we were able to move forward with the selection process. Unfortunately, we were unable to begin as early as we had planned, so it was mid-February before the six SOC positions were filled and training began. As we reflected on the new positions at the end of the spring semester, it became clear that we needed to recruit the SOCs in the fall. The SOCs could then begin work the first week of the spring semester. Those extra five weeks will make a major difference in the amount of work the students will be able to accomplish, and will provide more opportunity for training.

### **Did It Work?**

The addition of the Student Orientation Coordinator positions has enhanced the orientation program. The selected students did an excellent job of assuming their positions without hesitation, even knowing there would be challenges along the way. They brought an increased level of creativity to the staff team, designed several new programs and initiatives, and provided suggestions for improving existing programs. They worked exceptionally well together, collaborating with each other as needed. We learned that we needed to spend more time individually with the SOCs initially to more clearly outline their responsibilities, review what had been done in the past, and assist them with setting timelines for their projects. We also learned that we needed to set our weekly staff meeting time in advance and hire only individuals who could meet at that time. This year, one student was not able to attend staff meetings, and her office hours rarely overlapped with other SOCs. She felt disconnected, missed informative discussions, and had a difficult time becoming a team member.

The final test of the effectiveness of these positions will be the actual implementation of our orientation program, which has not yet occurred as of this writing. We hope that the SOCs will take a primary leadership role with the OLs and will serve as the front line for organization, implementation, and problem solving during the program. Because the SOCs have specific areas of responsibility, we believe that this will allow us to have smoother flowing programs and more accountability of the OLs.

This process of review and redesign was very successful for us. The idea of involving a few key individuals in the entire process while bringing in input from a wider variety of constituents helped create ownership of the changes. Also, it generated a high level of enthusiasm among the professional staff because we finally accomplished a goal that had existed for several years. This process can be applied to other areas within student affairs, not only orientation and transition programs. We will next use this process to review the services and programs we provide to student organizations and their advisers.

## References

- Pretty, B.A. (2000). Staff selection: effective people for effective programs. In M.J. Fabich, (Ed.). *Orientation planning manual*, (pp. 8-11). Pullman, WA: National Orientation Directors Association.
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