

Building the Connection: An Evaluation of New Student Orientation at a Woman's College

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The face of undergraduate education is changing, with young women encompassing the majority of baccalaureate enrollments. This study details an evaluation of new student orientation at a small, liberal arts woman's college. The results from the objectives-oriented evaluation show that initial orientation goals and outcomes were met successfully. Orientation programming for new students at women's institutions is addressed.

Since the late 1970s, trends in undergraduate education have shown a steady increase in the number of women attending 4-year institutions. In general, undergraduate enrollment is expected to continue growing over the next decade, but female enrollment is predicted to grow much faster than male enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Now, more than half of all full- and part-time college students are women.

Of particular interest in the current study were the orientation experiences of young women at single-sex institutions. There are more than 60 women's colleges in the United States (Women's College Coalition, 2005). The benefits and advantages of women's colleges have been documented extensively in the literature. By attending women's colleges, women report greater satisfaction with their college experience than their coed counterparts. Research shows an increase in active learning (Astin, 1993; Riordan, 1994), greater access to faculty (Smith, 1990; Tidball, 1986), and more enriching leadership opportunities (Manning, 1994; Whitt, 1994). Students attending women's colleges also convey higher levels of support and engagement within the campus community (Umbach, Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, & Kuh, 2003). With respect to educational attainment, studies show that young women undergraduates attending single-sex colleges are one and one-half times more likely to earn degrees in science and math than women at coeducational institutions (Sebrechts, 1992). As these studies show, substantial evidence does exist for the positive psychological and intellectual gains of students at women's colleges.

Orientation Programs

Orientation activities have many purposes for new students and their families. They set the tone for new student success, facilitate a satisfactory transition from secondary to

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post-secondary education and are critical to student retention (Astin, 1993; Nadler, Miller, & Casebere, 1998; Tinto, 1993; Twale, 1989). New student orientation programs allow a student to explore multiple social, academic, and extracurricular outlets. During this time, incoming students are introduced to members of the larger campus community through extensive interactions with faculty, staff, and other students. Because they are delivered in many different ways, orientation programs range from a few days to several months. The nature of orientation activities can vary from formal to informal, student-centered to institution-focused (Robinson, Burns, & Gaw, 1996). For most students, making the transition to college is difficult, but well-designed and effective orientation programs can facilitate a smooth shift from secondary to postsecondary education (Upcraft, Barefoot, & Gardner, 2004). The relationships and experiences that students have in those first few days of arrival can significantly influence the academic and emotional direction of the students' upcoming semester.

The purpose of the present study was to explicate findings from an objective-oriented evaluation of new student orientation at a woman's college. Objective-oriented evaluation is a method of evaluation where one assesses the degree of congruence between previously stated goals and observable outcomes (Fitzpatrick, Worthen, & Sanders, 2003). The specific evaluation question guiding the study was: *To what degree does new student orientation accomplish the following five goals: (1) help first-year students become familiar with campus facilities and resources; (2) facilitate positive adjustment to a new environment; (3) encourage personal confidence and new friendships among first-year students; (4) facilitate fun, open-mindedness, and preparedness for the college academic experience; and (5) increase excitement about the college and a sense of belonging among first-year students?*

Method

Setting and Participants

The participants in this study were all first-year students at a small, residential, liberal arts woman's college in the South. The institution was decidedly diverse. Of the over 700 students enrolled, approximately 12% were international students. International students came from over 40 countries around the world. The domestic student body was also diverse, with students hailing from 43 states in the union. The faculty/student ratio at this college was 9:1, and the average class size was 12. Of the 223 students who participated in orientation activities, 100 responded to the post-orientation survey. This resulted in a response rate of 44%.

Measure

The primary method of data collection was an evaluation survey instrument created by the director of new student programs. The survey incorporated both closed- and open-ended questions in the design. Closed-ended questions prompted students to rate

the degree of agreement with statements about their advising sessions, social activities, orientation leader, and the general orientation programming. These items were scored on a four-point Likert scale. Students were also asked open-ended questions about their favorite and least favorite academic and social events during orientation. Finally, participants were asked to make suggestions for improving orientation for future classes.

Procedure

Fall orientation at this college lasted 9 days, with new students and families arriving one week prior to the commencement of classes. During orientation, students met with faculty advisers, registered for fall classes, met with their orientation leader and group, and attended social functions to become acquainted with the college. Members of both the student affairs and academic affairs staff jointly developed orientation activities. After the last orientation activity, the staff member responsible for directing orientation administered the evaluation. The orientation survey was posted on the college's electronic repository for campus-wide information. Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical software and open-ended statements were read, re-read, and coded for emerging themes and patterns.

Results

Overall, the goals of orientation were achieved per the following quantitative and qualitative results. Over 90% of the respondents felt that the programs offered were informative and helpful. Approximately 85% of participants either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, "Attending orientation was an important component of my overall adjustment to this college." More than four fifths of the students [88%] felt orientation helped them become familiar with academic and social services offered on campus. Almost all students [93%] felt faculty and staff were helpful during orientation. Overall, 87% of the respondents were satisfied with the general orientation program. Major themes that emerged from the open-ended data showed that students enjoyed spending time with their orientation leader and group. Students reported liking social activities that allowed them to meet other first-year students and members of the local community. Finally, many students mentioned developing a positive relationship with their adviser. As anticipated, one theme that was prevalent was the need for down time in between academic program sessions. Students wanted more time to unwind and relax before attending subsequent orientation meetings and events.

Discussion

For campus administrators, orientation is the first step to making new students and their families feel welcome on campus (Ward-Roof & Hatch, 2003). It is critical during those initial meetings for students to feel a sense of belonging to the campus community as soon as possible. The transition period is difficult for first-year students and, as such,

orientation programs should be designed to facilitate positive academic and social growth and development from the start. In particular, for new students attending a woman's college, the transition to a single-sex environment can be challenging. Many times first-year students need reassurance that the decision to attend their institution was, in fact, the right one. Orientation activities that are well-defined, appropriate, engaging, and inclusive allow for the right mix of student-centered exploration and discovery.

Although the numbers of young women attending single-sex institutions is not increasing, it is still imperative that orientation professionals are well-versed in dealing with this group of students. As evidenced by the aforementioned results, administrators anticipate using the information from this evaluation to provide a more comprehensive experience for new students and their families in the future. Changes have already been made to the orientation program based on the results of this evaluation.

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