

Preparing for a Career: My Experience as a NODA Intern

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The first year of graduate school can be fast paced and exhausting. For many graduate students in higher education, this often requires numerous hours studying and reading, while also doing paraprofessional work in an area of student affairs.

My first year of graduate school at Bowling Green State University was no exception. I had experienced the rigors of learning student development theory, the history of higher education, and how the environments created by universities and colleges influence students. I received roughly 40 hours a week of paraprofessional development working as a graduate assistant at Heidelberg College in the Offices of Residence Life and Career Development. Throughout my first year of graduate school, every day presented a new challenge and offered a chance to learn, grow, and develop not only as a professional, but also as a person.

Because of a constant and ever-growing schedule of courses, assistantship responsibilities, practica, and committee work, the year flew by in the blink of an eye. Before I knew it, it was the end of the year and a new question quickly arose. What do I do this summer? There seemed to be many options that I could consider when looking for work. Some of my friends and classmates were applying and interviewing for internships with the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, some were taking time off to relax, and some were returning home. None of these options seemed to spark my interest. After about a week of contemplating what to do, I received an e-mail from a former colleague who said she did an internship with NODA when she was a graduate student, and it was one of the most rewarding experiences she had in graduate school.

This message instantly triggered a smile on my face and caused me to reminisce about my time as an undergraduate orientation leader and team leader at Bowling Green. I looked back on those years fondly; they were some of my best experiences as an undergraduate student. The position taught me lessons about customer service and organizational management. Best of all, it was my gateway into a student affairs graduate program. After receiving this message and looking back on my orientation experience, I knew I had to apply for an internship with NODA, especially because orientation was an area of student affairs that I wanted to work in when I finished graduate school. I got on the Internet, went to the NODA Web site, and began applying and sending out my resume for various NODA internships. Soon after, I received phone

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calls from about six institutions asking me to interview as a candidate for their summer intern position.

I quickly set up six phone interviews with the various institutions. These six phone interviews would eventually turn into 12. Little did I know that my first lesson as NODA intern would happen before I even stepped foot on another campus—how to interview over the phone. I quickly learned that phone interviews were much more difficult for me than face-to-face meetings. I learned about the time, preparation, and resources necessary to have a successful phone interview. After interviewing over a 2-week period with schools from coast to coast, including Hawaii, I ranked the institutions from most compatible to least compatible, and then waited to hear back from these institutions on the date when offers could be made to candidates. I waited patiently by the phone, hoping that my first choice would call and offer me a position. On the day that offers could be extended, I received a phone call from Northern Illinois University, offering me a position as their NODA intern for the summer. I was so excited because this school was my first choice for an internship site. I quickly accepted the offer and was on my way to an exciting summer as a NODA intern with orientation at Northern Illinois University.

After I accepted the offer, I was instantly filled with excitement and happiness. Then a sense of trepidation hit me all at once. I was moving about seven hours away from my home campus with no friends and family. I began to have doubts about the position and began asking myself many questions. How will I meet new people? Where will I live? How will I adjust to a different orientation program? Will the student leaders embrace me? The NIU students and professional orientation staff answered all of these questions, and many more, even before I arrived on campus. Their constant open lines of communication and their reassurance that all my basic needs would be met quickly put me at ease about the transition ahead of me.

When I arrived on campus, I was swept up in a whirlwind of activity, as summer orientation was only a week and half away. As an intern, I knew that it was essential to learn the “ins and outs” of the campus community in order to properly address the many questions new students and their guests would have when they arrived on campus. I spent the first few days of my internship getting adjusted to my surroundings and soaking up as much knowledge about the campus as I could in a short period of time. Throughout this process, I took several campus tours, talked to current students and professional staff, and read through numerous campus resources and publications until I felt comfortable answering some of the many questions I would be asked during orientation that summer. Because of my late arrival, I did not expect to be a part of the day-to-day operations of the orientation program. Before I arrived, I had envisioned myself shadowing one of the assistant directors during the program and lending a hand administratively whenever possible. However, this was not the case at all; from the moment I arrived, I hit the ground running and instantly became an integral part of the orientation team.

During my summer as an intern, I was given daily opportunities to improve essential skills needed to become an effective student affairs administrator. The first week I

arrived, I had the opportunity to take part in developing and facilitating various leadership sessions for orientation leader training. This gave me a chance to meet the eleven orientation leaders I would be working with, and it allowed me to begin evaluating some of their strengths and weaknesses as student leaders. It also gave me the ability to lean on these orientation leaders in order to gain more knowledge about NIU students and the institution as a whole.

Throughout the program, I was given many other opportunities to help with the day-to-day operations of the orientation program. One of these tasks was giving a 30-minute presentation to freshman and transfer students about the academic requirements students needed in order to receive a degree. I was also charged with creating an informational handout on online communities, such as MySpace and Facebook, and to give a brief 5–10-minute presentation on the topic of online communities during a technology seminar for family and guests. This was one of the most rewarding tasks for me throughout the summer because I was able to speak on a topic many parents knew very little about and was able to give them useful information, while easing concerns about their sons' or daughters' use of online communities.

Lastly, throughout the program I was also able to gain valuable experience from executing numerous administrative tasks. I was able to perform both check-in and check-out procedures; administer important assessment tools to both transfers and freshmen, which would be used to evaluate the orientation program and the freshman class; and also help teach new students the online registration process while they scheduled classes for the fall semester.

The most valuable perspective I gained was to compare and contrast the differences and similarities between a 1-day and 2-day orientation program at a large state institution. As an undergraduate, I was able to work with a 2-day comprehensive orientation and registration program in which students and guests spent the night inside the residence halls. However, this past summer, I was able to experience how a similar size institution can run a 1-day orientation program. Both programs were very effective in addressing the needs of the student culture at their particular institution. Only through my NODA internship did I have had the opportunity to compare the pros and cons of each type of program, and in the future, I will take that knowledge with me to my first job as a student affairs administrator.

Throughout my internship, I was able to gain valuable skills and perspectives that any well-rounded orientation professional should have before applying for a director or assistant director position. However, I was also given some advice from a staff member at NIU that was passed down to him when he started in orientation. He said, "Josh, if you take one thing with you from this orientation experience, remember this: Orientation is the last step in recruitment and the first step in retention at any institution." These words stayed with me throughout the summer and allowed me to recognize, as a NODA intern and a soon-to-be orientation professional, the profound effect a high quality orientation program can have on an institution and its student body.