

How Using a Common Language Helped Define Staff Selection

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The office of New Student Orientation at North Carolina State University is responsible for the collective efforts of planning and organizing nine 2-day and three 1-day orientation sessions each summer. One of the most important functions of our job every year is to recruit and select a new student staff to make this happen. The amount of time and energy spent on this task may be small compared to the actual planning of Orientation, but the success of the programs largely depends on the qualities and traits of the student staff that represents us each summer. We take great pride in the high expectations and professional standards that we set for our staff, which makes the selection process all the more critical.

Our selection model is much like those at other colleges and universities and like other departments on our campus seeking to employ student leaders in mentoring positions. We begin with a large-scale recruitment campaign throughout campus with flyers, posters, banners, and e-mails to listservs. We rely heavily on word of mouth, particularly from campus partners who work with and depend on our staff during Orientation. Interested students are sent to a Web site and are asked to fill out an online application. After completing the application, every candidate goes through a 30-minute individual interview with two professional staff members as well as a group interview in which professional staff members and former student staff members rate their performance in group activities. Each year, around 75 to 85 students go through the process and ultimately around 30 are selected to serve as Orientation Counselors (OCs).

One of the most challenging aspects of selecting staff members is distinguishing among a large pool of highly qualified candidates. Often, there seems to be only minor variations when comparing one candidate to another—most have excellent interpersonal skills, a strong academic record, and a solid work ethic, among other very desirable qualities. We often found it difficult to verbalize why we would select one candidate over another, even though we were fairly certain the students we selected would be able to do the job well (and for various reasons those we did not select would not).

Our process worked well until we began to include more former staff members in our group interview process. After each interview, the interviewers would meet to discuss our thoughts on each candidate. We found that we were often looking for similar qualities, but we each assigned different value to various attributes or skills that

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the students possessed. We realized we needed to create a standard language or rubric so we could compare each student based on the same criteria.

Creating a rubric also helped to address the difficulty of explaining to campus partners why a student they recommended was not offered a position on the staff. We seek a wide range of skills and qualities in our staff; our partners, not understanding all that we require, would sometimes recommend students with only a subset of the attributes necessary to be selected. This situation has at times caused stress in relationships and threatened to reduce the number of referrals we get from the people who have interaction with a large number of potential candidates. We believed that creating and sharing our selection rubric would address this concern with our partners.

The Rubric

Over time, a rubric for what exactly we were looking for in potential staff members was developed (see Appendix). As a staff, we decided that OCs were successful because of their ability to perform in three different capacities: in front of a group, within the team, and in their representation of New Student Orientation. This is not to say that we only hired students highly developed in all three components; often it was the *potential* for development that we were evaluating. Having a common rubric for evaluating staff allowed for easier and more productive selection meetings; we were able to select based on the rubric criteria, knowing from the beginning which aspects we would have to work on most during training for each staff member.

The first component of the rubric, the ability to lead a group, was an obvious component in staff selection. The professional staff plans Orientation, but it is the OCs who carry out each session. OCs meet with students in small groups throughout the sessions, take them on campus tours, and help them through the registration process. Students coming to Orientation need to be reassured that they made the right decision to attend our institution and that they will be happy in their new home. OCs are influential in achieving this goal, and therefore must be comfortable and confident in front of incoming students.

Before Orientation begins, OCs go through more than 100 hours of group training. The students work up to 16-hour days during the orientation season and live together on one floor of a residence hall for 6 weeks during the summer. Their ability to work in a team, to depend on one another, and to reach out to one another when they most need it is essential for the success of the program. Moreover, when working with a group of highly regarded leaders on campus, it is sometimes difficult for students to ask their peers for help and to see themselves both as leaders and equal members of the team. During the interviewing process, therefore, determining whether students are able to switch between being the leader and being a group member is an important task.

We pride ourselves on being among the most professional, helpful, and friendly staffs on our campus and we continuously tell our staff that as a program we have very high standards. As the first interaction that students have with the university after being officially admitted, Orientation should make them confident they made the correct

choice. The orientation staff represents the entire university, so we expect that they will always be on time, follow a fairly strict dress code, remain attentive at all times, not carry cell phones, and always be available to assist incoming students and their parents. These qualities do not always come naturally to students, so we must work hard during training to clearly define our expectations. While not many students will apply to be an Orientation Counselor with these skills, we seek candidates that demonstrate they understand what it takes to appropriately represent something greater than they are.

Lessons Learned

The recruitment and selection process for our student staff has been one of continual development and learning for our office. We certainly do not claim to have all of the answers to how to choose a perfect staff, nor are we attempting to build the perfect staff before any of our training begins, but we believe we are getting closer to where we need to be in this process. We used to begin each recruitment e-mail or letter we sent to the campus community with a generic statement about looking for campus leaders, a phrase that can be and was interpreted in a multitude of ways. Having created a rubric of the specific aspects for which we are looking, we can now share this information with campus partners who help us to recruit their students, and to candidates going through our process. Most importantly, this rubric helps us with the actual selection of our staff by helping us focus on the key components of the position and helping us realize that potential staff members need not be perfect, but instead must portray the potential to fit our staff, the position, and our program.

APPENDIX

North Carolina State University New Student Orientation
Staff Selection Rubric

Description	Excellent Always or Often	Good Sometimes	Fair Seldom	Poor Never
Leading a Group				
Public Speaking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is articulate and concise • Understands audience and engages them • Displays appropriate body language • Conveys positive nonverbal communication • Maintains eye contact • Engages in opportunities to speak in public when available 				
Interactions with Others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is welcoming and makes others feel comfortable • Demonstrates maturity • Exhibits charisma • Encourages and includes others • Is well-liked 				
Experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engages in leadership opportunities when available • Demonstrates ability to reflect what has been learned from past experiences 				
Part of a Group				
Followership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is willing to give up control • Supportive of others • Positively contributes • Listens to and follows directions 				

Part of a Group (Cont.)

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Description				
Interactions with Others <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains positive attitude • Uses humor appropriately • Includes others in conversations, decisions, and activities • Demonstrates humility • Respects others 				
Represents the University and Program Well				
Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses language appropriate to situation and audience • Is punctual • Dresses appropriately • Demonstrates respect for self and others 			
Judgment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to assess situation and respond/act accordingly • Is self-censoring 			
Genuine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is approachable, welcoming, and open to others • Exhibits honesty and sincerity 			
Information Delivery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides accurate information • Stays on message • Is concise when speaking • Communicates positive messages 			