

Satisfaction Guaranteed: Student Satisfaction of Orientation at Appalachian State University

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It is widely acknowledged that students' first introduction to college life can have a profound impact on student persistence and educational attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, this study investigates student satisfaction of orientation as self-reported by 213 undergraduate students at Appalachian State University (ASU). Results indicated that students were generally satisfied with their orientation experience. They were satisfied with the information that they received, their interactions with orientation staff, and with individual program offerings during the orientation event. Recommendations are made to enhance intentional and proactive planning measures to improve coordinated efforts for future orientation programs on a university wide basis.

Across the country, orientation programs at colleges and universities are as diverse as the institutions which host them. Their uniqueness stems from their institutions' mission, structure, and culture. However, orientation programs also share commonalities. Their purpose is to introduce students to the institution and the resources and services that are available to them. Orientation also helps students get to know each other as well as faculty and staff. Often, orientation provides opportunities for academic advising, and course registration. These objectives are vital to successful orientation programs.

This study was conducted at Appalachian State University (ASU), a public comprehensive university with an enrollment of approximately 16,600 students, of which 2,700 are first-year students. Most of ASU's student population (over 80%) is composed of in-state residents (<http://factbook.appstate.edu>). First-year students are required to live on campus during their first year of enrollment.

In preparation for this study and to gain a better understanding of the orientation program at ASU, this researcher conducted informational interviews with professionals who work in all areas of orientation. The researcher learned about the history and development of orientation at ASU, the rationale behind certain programmatic aspects, key decisions made in relation to the philosophical views of the purpose of orientation at ASU, knowledge of the current structure

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and staffing patterns, and anticipated changes to current practice.

Structure of Orientation Programs at Appalachian State University

The orientation program consists of two required phases for all first-year students. Phase One Orientation primarily is housed through the Office of Academic Advising and Orientation. Phase Two Orientation is based in the Center for Student Involvement and Leadership. Parent and Family Orientation is coordinated through the Office of Student Conduct.

Students begin by attending Phase One Orientation. This phase is held throughout the summer months where students register for classes, meet with academic advisors, and experience a taste of campus life by staying on campus overnight in residence halls. Student Orientation Undergraduate Leaders (SOULs) help new students become acquainted with the campus and other first-year students. Parent and Family Orientation coincide with Phase One Orientation.

After moving into their residence halls in the fall, first-year students participate in Phase Two Orientation. During this phase, students meet with current undergraduate students called Appol-Corp Leaders. One hundred Appol-Corp groups of 25–30 first-year students are assembled according to their residence hall floor. First-year students who get approved to live off campus are randomly assigned to meet with an Appol-Corp group along with fellow first-year students who live in on-campus housing. This grouping helps first-year students get to know other students as they participate in ASU Welcome Week events as a group.

Purpose of Study

This study investigated the following research question: Are students satisfied with their experience with orientation at Appalachian State University? The researcher reviewed the effectiveness of the current model and structure of orientation. The researcher also assessed which orientation format was more effective at ASU and what program components were most effective in aiding students in their transition. Results of an online survey and focus group participation brought to light both strengths and areas for change in ASU's orientation programs.

Literature Review

Professionals in the field of student affairs recognize the importance of assessment as a commitment to improvement of programs and services (Keeling, Wall, Underhile, & Dungy, 2008). While the research from several studies is somewhat dated, especially since orientation is a functional area that is constantly changing and adapting, this review provided the researcher with solid background information on what has occurred in the past in order to look towards the future of orientation.

Whyte (2007) completed a study of orientation programs throughout the United States and examined similarities in design and structure. For example, orientation programs throughout the U.S. are similar in using student leaders as “ambassadors” for their respective institutions. Some organizational staffing patterns and structural arrangements tend to be alike as well as some programmatic (topical) offerings. However, orientation programs also contain some fundamental differences. For example, at Elon University (a small, private institution), orientation is held three to four days before classes begin in the fall semester, whereas at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (a large, public university), orientation is held during twelve 2-day sessions over the summer months. In addition, institutions differ in the number of orientation student staff members and in training and compensation for their staff.

Orientation professionals also plan programs to address the characteristics of their current college students. Today’s incoming students are diverse. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s Almanac 2008-09*, 35% of the student population enrolled in higher education in the U.S. comes from minority groups. It is projected that 39% of the 2016 student population will be minorities (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2008). There is a direct correlation between the growing Hispanic population and the increasing number of first-generation college students. (Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009). As a result, orientation planners must be intentional to meet ever-evolving student needs.

Zis (2002) examined how drastically student characteristics have changed compared to past student generations. As access to college becomes easier and the nation’s diversity increases, students of diverse ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and academic abilities populate college campuses. Zis also stated that orientation professionals must be deliberate in the design of orientation programs. For example, at ASU, the Academic Advising and Orientation Center has recruited student staff members who represent the diversity of the student population on campus. Through this effort, students attending orientation are better able to connect with student staff and with the university as a whole.

It is vital to understand how the structure and design of orientation can affect students’ perceptions of the institution through their early experiences at the institution. It is also important to determine the impact of orientation on student learning and success. Miller, Dyer, and Nadler (2002) conducted a study that assists professionals in taking a critical look at their current orientation model. Orientation planners should analyze trends in their current model and adapt the program for increased student satisfaction and success. Through surveys and focus groups, this research assists orientation professionals at ASU in a similar manner.

Busby, Gammel, and Jeffcoat (2002) found that students who attended orientation at Stephen F. Austin University tended to have higher grade point averages than those students who did not attend orientation. This research suggested that students who are satisfied with their orientation experience performed better in their academic endeavors. LePeau, (L. LePeau, personal communication, February 2, 2008), created a way for orientation coordinators, faculty, and staff involved with orientation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte

to receive specific feedback addressing how students in their orientation groups rated them. She administered a variety of questions immediately following each orientation session using Student Voice, an online guide for assessing programs in student affairs. Academic advisors and other session presenters also received student feedback, allowing them to implement changes before the next orientation session. Receiving student satisfaction feedback immediately after each session helped UNCC staff to make instantaneous improvements to the student experience during orientation.

Methodology

This study examined first-year students who entered Appalachian State University during Fall 2008. A locally-developed instrument (LDI) was created based upon an instrument from the University of North Carolina Charlotte (UNCC), with modifications to meet the needs of the ASU program. The sample included student participants in Phase Two Orientation. First-year students who participated in Phase Two Orientation and had previously participated in Phase One were selected so that a holistic view of the orientation experience at ASU could be achieved. As previously noted, Phase Two Orientation occurs the week prior to the start of fall classes. On the first day of fall classes, Appol-Corp group attendance sheets were obtained from the Coordinator of Phase Two Orientation. Student participants who attended three or more Appol-Corp events with their Appol-Corp group were immediately e-mailed the survey.

The survey was administered through Survey Monkey, a commercial program that allows professionals to create a custom on-line survey. This survey was designed to explore student perceptions of orientation at ASU—what successes or challenges they had during orientation, support received, and problems encountered. Questions included both specific, programmatic themes of orientation at ASU and general satisfaction-related questions used by UNCC. The researcher used both four-point Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The four-point Likert scale model was used for the majority of questions as it allowed students to choose an answer to each question. The open-ended questions on the survey gave students the chance to expound on areas or events not queried through other questions.

Phase Two Orientation included those students who had a full orientation experience at ASU (they had attended all events as required up to the start of the fall semester). The survey was posted online for 74 days. Three reminder e-mails were sent to students who had not taken the survey. Altogether, 818 students were invited through e-mail to participate in the study. Of the 818 potential respondents, 212 students completed the survey for a return rate of 26%.

Students who completed the survey were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in follow-up focus groups by providing their e-mail addresses. Incentives for signing up for the focus groups were dinner and a \$50 gift card to Wal-Mart. Once the surveys were completed, all students who indicated they were interested in participating in the focus group were contacted.

The students had opportunities to attend a focus group session on two separate dates. A list of questions was also developed for the focus groups after reviewing responses in the initial survey. The questions were designed so that additional information could be gathered and certain topics could be clarified. Three students attended the first focus group, and one student attended the second focus group. The students provided qualitative information that enriched the quantitative data gathered from the survey.

Findings and Results

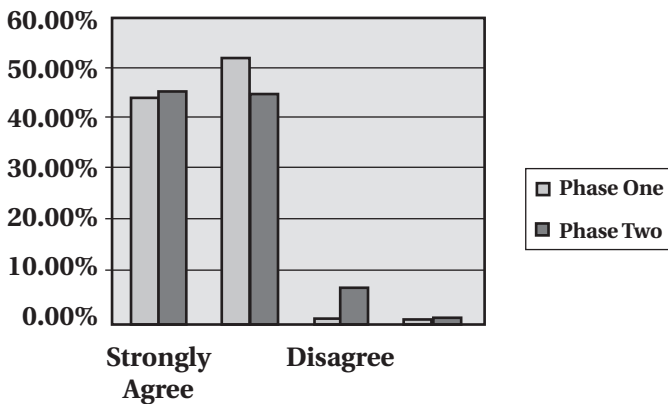
The data revealed positive results with regard to student satisfaction with their orientation experience at ASU. Results from both qualitative and quantitative data were categorized by a content analysis process. The resulting four themes emerged: Satisfaction with Information Received, Satisfaction with Orientation Staff, Satisfaction with Orientation Programs, and Overall Satisfaction with Orientation.

Satisfaction with Information Received

A majority of respondents agreed that information received regarding Phase One Orientation was useful—53.8% of students agreed with that statement, and 46.2% of students either strongly agreed or agreed regarding their satisfaction with information at Orientation Phase Two. The data suggests that the information provided about the orientation experience prior to students arriving and information provided at orientation about ASU was consistent.

FIGURE 1

Information and Resources Received



Satisfaction with Orientation Staff

The majority of students (66.7%) responded that they agreed with the statement, "My SOUL Leader was able to communicate with us well." A student who participated in the focus groups commented on the interactions with the SOUL and Appol-Corp Leaders by saying, "My SOUL Leader made me want to be one myself. She was awesome." Another respondent stated, "I loved my Appol-Corp Leader; he was really cool and helped us to understand what it was like to be an ASU student."

Satisfaction with Orientation Programs

This research also explored student satisfaction with specific programmatic aspects of the orientation experience at ASU. By examining unique sessions and events that ASU provided as a part of the student orientation experience, administrators learned that these events are consistent with student satisfaction of their overall orientation experience.

Overwhelmingly, the data suggested that students were satisfied with the events that took place both at Phase One Orientation and Phase Two Orientation, and that information was disseminated consistently at both phases.

In addition, orientation sessions seemed to be well-planned. According to the data, the "Opening Session" during Phase One Orientation was well received, as 89% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that this session made them feel more comfortable at orientation. During a focus group session, one student had this to say about the Chancellor's New Student Convocation: "It made me feel more a part of the Appalachian family, and it helped me meet more people." Through an open-ended question, another student remarked, "The best part [of Phase Two Orientation] was Convocation with Chancellor Peacock. His enthusiasm and welcoming spirit were encouraging."

Overall Satisfaction with Orientation

Students were asked to rate their overall experience with Phase One and Phase Two Orientations at ASU. Seventy percent of the students strongly agreed and 27.6% agreed that their impression of ASU was positive as a result of attending Phase One Orientation. These results spoke to the strengths of the Phase One Orientation program. In addition, 65.2% of students strongly agreed and 30.0% agreed that they felt more confident with starting college as a result of Phase Two Orientation.

The overall data suggested that first-year students had a positive experience with Phase One and Phase Two Orientation. Students indicated that they enjoyed their orientation experience and learned much about ASU. Their orientation experience seemed to confirm their decision to attend the university.

Discussion and Limitations

Several limitations to this study must be noted. First, the findings were derived by self-report. Self-reported data can have limitations in that respondents may have answered the questions according to what they believe the researcher wanted/expected to hear. This could potentially be true in this particular study as the student respondents were first-year students who desire to fit in at ASU and probably want to project a positive first impression.

The general reliability of the findings is limited. Only 213 out of 818 eligible students responded for a return rate of 26%. Additionally, the ethnic background of respondents was limited in diversity—91% of the respondents indicated that they were Caucasian, 4.2% were African American, 3.6% were Hispanic, and 1.0% were Asian. It is interesting to note that the total population of students that attended Phase One and Phase Two Orientations (and thus eligible to participate in the study) was female. Therefore, the gender of the respondents is not representative of the ASU population, and this is also a limitation. While a return rate for survey data of 26% is acceptable, having more representative student participation in the study would add strength to the findings.

Increased student involvement might have been possible if more incentives were given for participation in the survey portion of the study. More information and communication about the survey for students attending Phase One Orientation could have helped increase student participation in the evaluation of Phase Two Orientation. The timing of the survey may also have affected students' willingness to participate, as well as the quality of their answers. Surveys sent to first-year students when they are still settling into a new campus environment and having new experiences may be poorly timed. Administering the survey in Appol-Corp groups at the end of Phase Two Orientation could have been a better time for students in terms of higher participation and quality of responses.

Despite these limitations, this research stands as a useful exploratory study to assess and evaluate the delivery of Phase One and Phase Two Orientations at ASU. It also provides information for program development and further improvement of the orientation program at ASU. While research and evaluation for the holistic orientation experience at ASU is fairly new, continuing such research will benefit future students.

Recommendations

In preparation for recommending improvements to current practice, the researcher consulted the Council for Advancement of Standards (CAS) and the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) for a compilation of industry standards. The following recommendations are based on such standards.

The results of this study identified several areas of interest that need to be intentionally reviewed for changes and improvements. These recommendations are currently being considered for possible implementation by staff at ASU. To ensure that students continue to receive consistent information throughout their

orientation process, ASU professionals working in orientation should examine how multiple sets of student leaders are trained. A thorough and consistent training program for SOUL and Appol-Corp Leaders should be employed. Training should include a well-rounded approach for training student leaders. By using both theoretical background and campus specific information in training, staff can better understand first-year students and keep the mission and vision of the program their main priority. In addition to consistency in training, professionals should create more cohesion among the two sets of student leaders. By building a more cohesive relationship among the two groups of student leaders, the experiences of incoming students will be more integrated.

Professionals should also review student attendance at Phase Two Orientation. Developing a method to motivate students or creating incentives for attendance at events will increase the quality of the Phase Two Orientation experience. Specifically, all first-year students must live on campus, and therefore these students are a captive audience for extended orientation components led by multiple sets of student leaders. The Office of Academic Advising and Orientation would be well served to collaborate more closely with Housing and Residence Life as a way of training both Resident Assistant student staff and other student leaders to recruit students to attend Phase Two Orientation.

The data suggest that students were satisfied with events and sessions presented during Phase One and Phase Two Orientations. Student responses also suggest that these events portray ASU accurately, and that the events and sessions effectively educate first-year students on the particular topics. Topics include registering for classes, campus resources, academic advising, services offered by the university, and student culture at ASU. Examining better methods to provide feedback after each orientation session will help to improve the information received by incoming students.

Orientation professionals working with Phase Two Orientation should look at automating the evaluation process to provide more efficient and timely feedback. In addition, as recommended by the CAS Standards for Orientation Programs (2006), a set of learning outcomes should be formulated to address the mission and vision of the Academic Advising and Orientation Center. This set of learning outcomes should be used to guide the holistic orientation experience of students at ASU. These learning outcomes could then be used to base an evaluation process and strategic planning process for the entire campus-wide experience.

Although these recommendations are based upon a snapshot of the findings of one institution, other orientation programs may look to this research to further refine their programs. Specifically from this article orientation professionals can gain:

- The importance of implementing a comprehensive assessment plan that evaluates program effectiveness. Through ongoing assessment efforts, best practices for orientation, both on an institutional level and the profession as a whole, will be established and/or affirmed.
- A better understanding of the importance of training student leaders involved with orientation.

- A sense of how communication among orientation professionals can affect program consistency, information received by first-year students, and the entire orientation experience for a first-year student.
- The value of adjusting programs to meet the needs of the diversification of students and changing campus cultures.
- An understanding of what types of assessment are currently being used at one institution to evaluate orientation and first-year programs. This information can be adapted by others as they look to create a comprehensive assessment plan that evaluates the holistic orientation experience from an institutional context (i.e., new student orientation and how it interfaces with first-year summer reading, first-year seminars, and living-learning communities).

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